

NOVEL
24

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Rifujin na
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Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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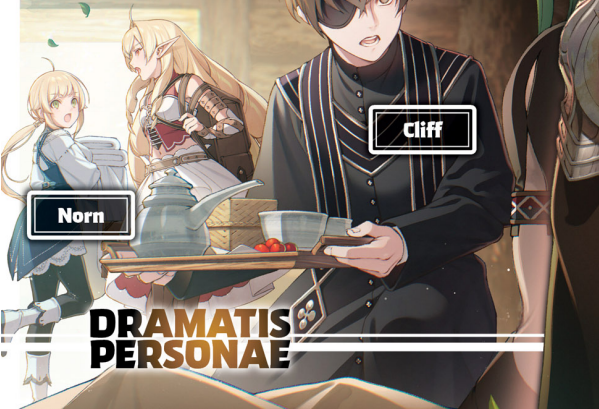
Ruijerd



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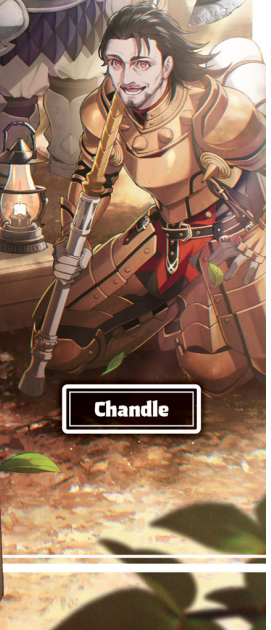
DRAMATIS PERSONAE



Cliff



Rudeus



Chandle



“Rudeus.”

He was about to
tell me something
I didn't want to
hear. Unpleasant
possibilities flooded
my mind.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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VOLUME 24: ADULTHOOD — THE FINAL BATTLE ARC

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"Some men achieve great things."

—Genius isn't real, as a concept.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

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Chapter 1: A Strategy Meeting

I SAT IN THE MEETING ROOM at the offices of the Orsted Corporation, directly opposite Orsted himself. Sitting on either side of me were Eris, Roxy, Sylphie, and Zanoba. Roxy was in charge of taking minutes.

“And that about sums it up,” I said. In my report, I’d summarized our chain of discoveries. First, there’d been Geese and North God Kalman the Third. It put Orsted in a good mood when I told him that we’d found them in the Biheiril Kingdom. He didn’t actually say anything, but I sensed he wanted to tell me, “Way to go!” Those high spirits buoyed the rest of my report.

But the moment I said, “We found Ruijerd,” his face became a thunderstorm.

“Um, if it was something I said...” I added. I couldn’t work out whether he was angry or not. He was glaring at me. The vibes were so bad that I shivered. I got ahold of myself quickly, but I couldn’t totally shake the anxiety since I had no idea what Orsted was gloomy about.

After a long pause, he said, “The Ogre God is also in the Biheiril Kingdom.”

The Ogre God lived on Ogre Island in the east of the kingdom.

“You said the Ogre God could easily be turned against us, right?”

I hadn’t forgotten. I was just checking.

“In one of the past loops, this generation’s Ogre God became a disciple.”

Hmm. Maybe that meant Geese’s location was a trap... It was also possible that Geese was trying to recruit the Ogre God. I wouldn’t get answers to those sorts of questions in a meeting room. I’d have to go there and find out. Since we were already in a meeting, I decided I ought to use the time to get everyone on the same page.

“With all that in mind,” I said, “I’d like to discuss our strategy going forward.”

“All right.”

“We have all the pieces we need for now. I don’t think we can avoid or put off going to the Biheiril Kingdom any longer,” I said, launching into my strategy presentation. “I can’t say for sure that this isn’t Geese’s—and by extension the Man-God’s—trap. But with Geese constantly giving us the slip, who knows when we’ll get another chance to catch him? There might not be a better opportunity. While it’s unfortunate that we couldn’t locate the former Sword God Gall Falion or the second North God, I’d still like to go to the Biheiril Kingdom. What do you think?”

“I have no objections,” Orsted replied.

Atofe would already be acting on the information of Geese’s whereabouts regardless of what I did. I hadn’t asked her how she planned on getting to the Biheiril Kingdom, but she’d take a while to make it there. A month or two, maybe more. I needed to get to the Biheiril Kingdom not just to rendezvous with her, but also to make sure the locals had time to brace themselves for her arrival.

“I have four objectives,” I went on. “Find Geese and take him out. Find North God Kalman the Third and recruit him. Find Ruijerd and recruit him. Find the Ogre God and either recruit him or take him out. I’ll handle them...er, in that order. Is that okay, sir?”

“...I suppose.”

If it were up to me, I’d have gone to see Ruijerd ASAP, but I supposed the North God had to come first. As for the Ogre God, it might be easier to just put him in Atofe’s path as she cut across the ocean. It would probably happen anyway if I left them to their own devices. I didn’t even know *how* to get in touch with Atofe, now that I thought of it. I’d set up a contact tablet at Fort Necross as a means of communication, but that was it. Maybe it was all right to put off worrying about that until after Atofe showed up. I might not have a choice anyway. It’d be a real hassle not being able to get hold of her if there were an emergency, though...

“If it looks like Geese’s forces outnumber ours, I’ll call for backup.”

My enemy awaited me in the Biheiril Kingdom. It might be a trap. If we showed up and Geese's forces were all there but the man himself was gone, I'd be the boy who cried goose. It was one of those things that was bound to happen occasionally, but it could damage the trust all those countries placed in us.

"I don't think it'll be too late to call for backup if I wait till after we find him," I said.

I'd check first: Enemy? Present. Battle? On. *Then* I'd call in my allies. That way was safer.

If we ended up repeatedly cycling through the same process—we find Geese, my allies assemble, Geese escapes, everyone goes home—my allies would eventually stop showing up. All this would have been for nothing.

"I'd like to set up teleportation circles for when I need to summon my allies."

The Biheiril Kingdom was only a minor nation, but it still had three large cities. The capital of Biheiril, the second city of Irelil, and the third city of Heirulil.

"I'll put one in the vicinity of each of the cities." I glanced at Roxy. "There aren't many people who can accurately draw magic circles, but my magnificent teacher, with her incredible foresight, has drawn up a number of teleportation circle scrolls for just this purpose. A round of applause, please." A thunderous ovation broke out. A rain of confetti fluttered over the stage where Roxy stood, mic in hand. When she waved to her fans, assembled in the hall from all over the world, scores of them collapsed in a swoon. At least, that's how it played out in my brain.

"I'm sending people to the Biheiril Kingdom's neighbors to watch the main roads. We'll use the Ruquag Mercenary Band in Sharia."

Linia and Pursena would do that, with Aisha helping too.

"After plugging potential escape routes, I'll hunt Geese down. Then, as soon as I find him, I'll call for backup. We'll defeat him."

The main thing was confirming he was there. After that, it would be just a matter of stopping him from getting away until our forces arrived. Fortunately, the Biheiril Kingdom was surrounded by forests, mountains,

and oceans. It didn't share borders with too many other countries. When Kishirika used the Demon Eye to find Geese, she'd also sensed the Man-God. That meant the Man-God had likely sensed her too, and so it was possible Geese had already run. Like he'd said in his letter, he could even make a getaway through the forests as long as he had a companion. Blocking off the main roads was mostly for my own comfort.

"I see," Orsted said. "Then who will handle the magic circles?"

"We should split the task up. One person for each circle."

"Isn't that too risky?" Sylphie objected. "I mean, they'll go after you, right, Rudy?"

"Yeah," I replied with a nod.

Assuming for the moment that Geese's letter was trustworthy, he'd said he was after *me*. It wasn't hard to imagine myself running straight into the jaws of a trap if I went out alone. Or he could play divide and conquer.

"Thanks to Sir Orsted's bracelet, I can avoid the Man-God's surveillance. Geese and the Man-God can't detect me, Sir Orsted, or anyone near us. Geese will probably turn to analog methods to try and locate me—plain old information gathering. That's why I'm going to disguise myself and get the magic circle in place quickly before he catches me."

Trap or not, it was better I didn't go advertising my presence—hence a disguise. It would only be a matter of time before I was exposed if Geese looked for me, but I could at least avoid being surrounded and taken out the moment I arrived in the country. Provided luck was on my side and things went smoothly, I'd be the one getting the jump on Geese.

If there was no trap, that meant neither Geese nor the Man-God had predicted being seen by Kishirika's Demon Eye. If that wasn't part of their plan, Geese would probably run unless his business in the Biheiril Kingdom couldn't wait. He might stay until the last possible moment to try and finish whatever it was before I arrived. If he disguised himself to delay me finding him, he'd buy some time before he had to make a run for it. There'd be no downside for him.

"It might be worth staging a diversion if you want to stay hidden, Rudy," Roxy suggested.

A diversion. In other words, I'd make them think I'd suspected a trap and decided against going to the Biheiril Kingdom. It'd throw them if they laid out the bait and only caught small fry instead of the big fish they expected.

"A diversion? Do you have a specific plan in mind?"

Roxy nodded. "I do. Why not have one of us go to the Sword Sanctum? Queen Ariel said she'd deploy reinforcements whenever you need them. That'd include Ghislaine and Isolde, right? Those two know the people at the Sanctum well and should be able to hold their own in a fight. The current Sword God doesn't serve the Man-God, if what you told us is correct. I think finding someone there who can help us and bringing them back could work. Sword King Nina, for example."

Nina. Eris had personally tried to bring her over to our side. She was no substitute for the Sword God, but given she could go toe to toe with Eris, she'd be an asset. She'd seemed really engrossed in something when we last visited her, though. It was hard to say if she'd come.

"Oh! Okay, I'll go, then." A hand went up—Sylphie's. I *did* trust Sylphie to handle those negotiations. She was acquainted, in a manner of speaking, with Nina, Isolde, and Ghislaine. Plus, if Sylphie went, that in and of itself would serve as a diversion. She'd already had the baby, so there wasn't much value in killing her, but she might still be a target. The Man-God knew all too well who I most wanted to keep safe. If my wives split up, that might make it harder to work out my location. Only one thing worried me.

"Are you worried about the danger?" I asked.

"It's a risk," Roxy acknowledged. "But given we know where Geese is, I think it should be minimal."

She had a point. And surely, after going to the trouble of recruiting his allies, Geese wasn't about to let them get picked off one by one. We could assume they were wherever Geese was.

Unless...that was what they *wanted* me to think.

"The Man-God knows what you hold dearest, Rudy. If we go, it should serve as a diversion," said Roxy, as if she'd read my mind.

Hold on a second. Didn't that make my plan kind of insane? I was going to set up teleportation circles in the Biheiril Kingdom, then call in my forces. Getting to each of those locations would take half a day, if not a full one. Wouldn't that make it easy to pick *me* off? This felt like the beginning of an all-out war. Was this the part of the story where the divided allies start getting picked off? Since coming to this world, I had learned that things didn't play out like in light novels. I still didn't like it.

"Actually, I'm starting to rethink this..." I backpedaled. "Maybe this strategy was a mistake..."

"Oh, Rudy," Roxy sighed. She could see I'd lost my nerve. "Listen. When adventurers go into a labyrinth, they plan it so they have no casualties. Everyone does the best they can, and that raises the probability of them coming home alive. Up until now, all we've been able to contribute is to stay home and look after the children. Sylphie and I certainly can't hold a candle to you and Eris in a fight. Now, I think using us out in the field will raise the probability of everyone coming home alive."

Probability...? She was right, it was all probability. Nothing is ever one hundred percent certain. Even when you try to stay safe and secure, things happen that you weren't expecting. Plans can fail because of circumstances you never dreamed of.

"I know you want to keep us shut up at home, Rudy," Roxy went on, "but if you lose, it won't matter how tightly you seal us away. It'll be over for all of us. Yes, each choice comes with risk, but let's be brave. Then we can laugh about it together when this is all over."

How could I ever be happy again if I lost any of them? If I came home from the Biheiril Kingdom and found Roxy or Sylphie or Eris gone, would I be able to laugh then? Not a chance.

"Rudy, we're all parents now. We have to think about the future."

I saw Paul's face in my mind's eye. If Paul were still alive, what would he have done right then? When he went into the Teleportation Labyrinth, he took me with him. When the displacement incident happened... Well, he lost it. Best to put that out of mind.

Before that, when we were living in Buena, he never shut me up in the house. I do think he tried to protect me, but he also let me wander

around a village where you didn't have to go far to run into danger. Zenith, when she wasn't pregnant, worked at the local healing center. Even after she got pregnant, I had the feeling she'd been out and about pretty frequently once she was stable. Paul wasn't a perfect dad. He also didn't have enemies who wanted him dead. Nevertheless, I was still alive today, so maybe saying "no" to everything was a sign I was getting overprotective. On the other hand, this was a totally different situation...

"Yeah, Roxy's right," Sylphie agreed. "We'll take the risk. So long as someone survives to look after the kids after our enemies are defeated, we'll get by."

"Yeah!" Eris said after a beat. I couldn't tell if she'd actually been following the conversation up until then, but she agreed with Sylphie.

Zanoba and Orsted stayed silent while we discussed family, but I was sure they would pipe up if any part of the conversation struck them as outrageous.

"Right, let's go with that, then," I said. "Any objections?"

None. We had our plan.

I'd conceal my true identity, then we'd split up to search for Geese. Once we had him, we'd cut off his escape routes to stop him from getting away, wait for our backup, and then eliminate him.

"All right, then. Next on the agenda..."

We hammered out the details of the plan.

After the discussion, we settled on splitting into the following teams:

Team Stop Geese Escaping into a Neighboring Country: Aisha, Linia, Pursena, the rest of the Mercenary Company.

Team Create a Diversion by Getting Nina from the Sword Sanctum: Sylphie (Ghislaine, Isolde)

Team Capital City: Zanoba, Julie, Ginger

Team Second City: Rudeus

Team Third City: Eris, Roxy

We'd each set up a teleportation circle, then move on to searching for Geese and the North God. Sylphie would follow the plan we'd discussed. Zanoba would focus on getting information. Eris and Roxy would handle the Ogre God. I was sure Aisha would do me proud heading up the team in charge of cutting off Geese's escape routes.

My own task would involve Ruijerd.

I'd heard he and the Ogre God shared a long history. Then there was the Third North God Kalman, who'd set off for the Biheiril Kingdom with such perfect timing.

The bond between Ruijerd and me ran deep.

I had no choice but to split my forces, since I had no idea what Geese was up to. It would be best to keep communication going between all of us and let the plan stay flexible. Those of us heading for the Biheiril Kingdom would get going at once. The longer we sat around here, the likelier it was that Geese might cover his tracks. I'd already hunted down Kishirika to get her to locate Geese; I wasn't going through that *again*.

Sylphie would set off a bit later. Ariel had said she'd send me reinforcements right away, but she had her own things to take care of. It wasn't like Ghislaine and Isolde would arrive the instant after we called.

Julie, Ginger, Linia and Pursena, and the mercenaries each had their own jobs. I was tearing them away from their lives, but this confrontation would decide everything. It had to be done, no matter the cost.

Was this an opportunity, or a trap? Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I was going to act as if it was the former.

I related the plan to Ariel and Cliff via contact tablet. Ariel's reply came at once, saying "I'm sending backup with all possible speed," but there was still nothing from Cliff. Unlike Ariel, who kept her tablet in her chambers, all communications to Cliff went through the Millis branch of the Mercenary Band. I could expect delays.

"Any questions?" I asked, looking around. No one raised their hand.

I was a little worried about Zanoba. Based on the information we had, I was prioritizing the third city for its proximity to Ogre Island and the second city because it was near the spot where Ruijerd had been sighted. The capital had the most people; it could easily be the most dangerous. Ginger was an accomplished intelligence agent and Zanoba a formidable warrior, but he was weak to fire magic.

“Be careful, Zanoba,” I said.

“I shall be on my guard. But for my own part, I am more concerned about the Store.”

“Oh, now that you mention it...”

In theory, the store and factory could function without a boss. But with Zanoba and Julie both gone, who knew what would happen if something major went wrong?

“I did want to leave Julie behind...” I said.

“Hahaha. I promised her we’d never be separated again.”

Julie really did love Zanoba. I had to wonder how Zanoba felt—maybe it was mutual. I couldn’t exactly ask such a personal question. Zanoba had this way about him when it came to women, like he kept them at arm’s length.

If they ever had a kid, I’d never let him hear the end of it. *You filthy lolicon, you!* It wasn’t my place to comment from the sidelines before anything happened, though.

“Eris, you all good?”

“...Yeah.” Eris didn’t look happy. I think she wanted to go with me. Unfortunately, if she did that, there’d be no one to protect Roxy. Also, when Eris and I were together we stood out. Eris did *not* do covert operations.

That’s why I’d placed her with Roxy, the second most noticeable. They’d be like Team Diversion.

“I don’t like this, you going alone,” Eris said.

Fair enough. I was worried about me too. I wasn’t sure I could both perfectly avoid Geese’s notice *and* collect information. Geese was a master of intelligence. Unless I played this carefully, he’d have me the moment he

heard there was someone looking for Ruijerd and North God Kalman. If that happened, he'd be gone before I could reach him.

Besides, nothing good ever came of my working alone.

"I've got something planned," I told her. "You'll see."

Maybe I should've been finding us a couple more guys who could help with intelligence over the last six months. Oh well. Hindsight and all. Wasn't worth stewing over it.

"What about you, Sir Orsted? If possible, I'd appreciate it if you could stay here and manage the contact tablets, protect my family. That sort of thing."

After a pause, Orsted said, "Very well."

"Thank you very much."

Orsted would be house-sitting, then. He stood out too much to make a good spy. I might need him at some point, but it was still infinitely preferable to have him stay here until the battle started. *Then* he could join the fighting. There was still the thing with his magic, so I couldn't expect him to carry a battle or anything. He was more of a final trump card. I mean, that's what his follower—i.e., me—was good for: allowing him to conserve his magical energy. If Orsted joined the fighting at this point, that meant we'd already lost.

Orsted stayed silent. I had the feeling he had something he wanted to say, but I couldn't read his expression through his helmet. Maybe he was worried. Heck, we were about to kick off a major strategic play—he was probably nervous like the rest of us.

Finally, he said to me, "Rudeus, keep that ring on. Just in case."

"What ring?"

"The Death God's ring."

I looked at my hand. There, on my finger, was the skull ring. My gift from the Death God was a flesh-crawling thing to behold. For whatever reason, even after meeting with Kishirika, I hadn't taken it off.

"May I ask why?"

"Just in case. You only have to wear it for it to be effective."

“...All right, I will.” I didn’t get it, but such is life. All I had to do for it to work was wear it. It’d all make sense when the time came. Hopefully.

“There’s also something I wanted to apo—” Orsted began, but then someone said, “Excuse me,” and he shut his mouth again.

Who was that? What fool employee dares interrupt the boss when he’s talking?

I looked around, but no one had spoken. No one even had their hand up.

It had been a woman’s voice. Who’d said it?

“Chairman...”

She called me “Chairman,” which could only mean... Huh? She wasn’t even in the room.

“We have visitors!” said the voice, a little more urgently.

Aha, it’s coming through the door! Mystery solved. It’s Little Miss Elf from the reception desk... What’s her name again?

“Sorry, I’ll go see what it is,” I said. I’d *told* her not to disturb us while we were in our meeting. It could be an emergency.

“...Whoa!”

When I stepped into the lobby, the first thing my eyes registered was gold. Head-to-toe gold. A guy in gold armor stood glinting before me.

“Wha—?!”

“Hey.” The humanoid gold nugget raised a hand.

That voice. That gesture. A vision of a certain person came to mind. Golden knights. I’d heard the Fighting God Armor had been gold. Back in the day, Badigadi, as a disciple, had fought Laplace in golden armor.

It all clicked. They were here to attack me!

Geese was a decoy all along! The Man-God salvaged the Fighting God Armor and sent an advance guard to get me—

“These gentlemen say they came here by teleportation circle on the orders of Queen Ariel,” supplied the elf girl.

—aaand that’s not what’s up at all.

Now that I got a better look at it and took into account the dim light, the armor was more of a dull ocher.

“Glad to have you,” I said.

The man took off his helmet. Underneath, he had a head of black hair—relatively rare in this world. He looked around fifty or so. Deep lines sectioned his face, and he carried himself like a veteran warrior. I’d met this guy once before, at the Asuran palace outside Ariel’s chambers.

“It’s been a while,” I said. Last time, if I recalled correctly, he’d made a speech worthy of an edgelord teenager, then refused to tell me his name. I knew it, though. The other man there with him, Sylvester, had told me.

“Good to see you. Will I have the pleasure of learning your name this time?” I asked.

He let out a *ha* of laughter that seemed to imply now wasn’t the right time, but he’d humor me. “I am Chandle von Grandour, knight in service to Queen Ariel.”

“My pleasure, much obliged. I’m Rudeus Greyrat.” He bowed to me, so I bowed back. Thinking about it, I’d never heard of the Grandour family. I’d forgotten to ask Orsted about them last time. Chandle hadn’t seemed all that important.

“I am here on urgent, top-secret orders from Her Majesty,” Chandle said. He held out the box he carried under one arm.

Urgent? That must have meant he’d just gotten them. I’d only sent Ariel the details of the plan during the meeting. That woman moved fast.

“Thank you,” I said. “What’s this?”

“There is a magical implement inside that can change your appearance. Her Majesty said you’d need it.”

Oh ho. There *had* been a device like that in the Asura Kingdom, hadn't there? But even then, it was impressive that she'd had it ready to hand over. Maybe she'd already suspected I'd need it and had it ready to go.

"Please confirm the contents," Chandle prompted me.

"Okay." I cracked open the box and, sure enough, there was a set of matching rings: one red, one green. The wearer of the green ring would take on the appearance of the wearer of the red ring. With these, I could make myself look like a totally ordinary villager.

"In addition, this is the royal insignia of Asura," he said, holding out another box. "Her Majesty gives you leave to use it should you find yourself in trouble, along with her name."

I took the box and opened it up to find a medal. It bore the coat of arms of the royal family of Asura. Ariel must have had it made fresh. It looked brand new, and writing letters for me every single time had to be a pain. I owed Ariel yet another favor now.

"We also have instructions to assist you, Master Rudeus."

To assist me? They must have been filling in until the backup got there. Naturally, Ariel couldn't just send a Sword King and a Water Emperor away without notice, so she'd sent us some knights with nothing better to do. Strike that. It wasn't fair to him to call it "filling in." He'd do fine as a backup in his own right. And this was Ariel—I knew she wouldn't send me an amateur incapable of carrying out top-secret operations.

"Wait," I cut in, realizing what he'd said. "'We'?"

"Indeed. Come on, say hello!" Chandle called, gesturing with his head.

It was like a section of wall had sprung to life. In a corner of the lobby, looking like part of the furniture, was a huge suit of armor. Somehow I hadn't noticed it, even though it'd never been there before. It didn't have much presence.

Once you noticed, though, you couldn't ignore him. He was a hulking figure in gray armor and had an absolutely massive battle axe strapped to his back.

"I'm, uh, Dohga," he grunted.

“My...my pleasure. I’m Rudeus Greyrat.”

Dohga. I’d met this guy once before, too. He’d been guarding Ariel’s chambers and wasn’t exactly...the sharpest tool in the box, let’s say.

He was a knight and not just an axe guy, then. Even though his name and his physique were tough, there was an innocence to his face. I read him as the strong, kind, silent type. He was maybe in his twenties—or even still a teenager.

Chandle, in his ocher armor, had a silver fox thing going on. He was pretty broad himself, but next to Dohga, he looked like a reed. They looked like two parts of a tag-team boss battle.



“Well, your wish is our command. I can do anything you need.”

“Um, right...” Now that they were here, what the heck would I do with them? Was the sensible option to put them on the mercenary team? Maybe I could stick them with Zanoba. I couldn’t see them all getting along.

“...Chandle, you’re a fighter?”

“Of course. I’m rated the strongest of the Royal Asuran Knights.”

The strongest, huh? I guessed Ghislaine and Isolde probably didn’t count as members of the knight order.

To be honest, he didn’t look like he’d hold up in a fight. But he was genial and, from what I’d seen of him at the Asuran palace, quite funny. I’d probably like him as a friend.

“We’ll likely be fighting the Great Powers. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Without question. I’ve been prepared to die ever since I pledged myself to serve Queen Ariel.”

Hmmm. Okay, fine. For all I knew, Ariel had sent him because he was disposable. I’d put him with Zanoba—but hold up. This was a bit weird, right? I’d literally just sent that message to Ariel. She worked fast, but *this* fast? The timing was too perfect. What if the Man-God—

“You,” said a voice. I turned to find Orsted behind me.

Chandle bowed. “Good day, Dragon God Orsted. It’s a pleasure to see you, and I’m delighted to see that your curse is better under control than Queen Ariel indicated.”

I shot a glance at Elf Girl. She had her arms crossed over her torso, gazing at Orsted with an expression of fervent emotion. What was *that* about? It couldn’t be the first time she’d seen him, surely. He did have the helmet on, but maybe the curse was affecting her less than she’d expected.

But never mind that. I was focused on Chandle.

“You serve Ariel now?” Orsted said.

“I do. I have the certification here.” He pulled a piece of paper out of a pocket to show Orsted.

It did in fact read *I appoint Chandle von Grandour as Captain of the Golden Asuran Knights*. It had Ariel's own signature, as well as the Asura coat of arms. He'd brought it with him. Something about that felt sketchy, but it was probably something I carried from my prior suspicions of him.

"You two will go with Rudeus. Geese won't know your faces."

"As you command."

"That works for you, Rudeus?"

"Huh? Oh, um, sure." Just like that, Orsted had appeared and the decision was made for me. If that was Orsted's command, I guessed we'd go with it...

"Wait, actually, that doesn't work for me. Can we back up a bit? We can't decide just like that. Who even *is* this guy? You seem to know him, Sir Orsted."

"Yes, he's—" Orsted fell silent. I looked over at Chandle and saw he had a finger to his lips.

"If he doesn't know, perhaps we'd be better off keeping it that way?" he suggested. "Right now, I am Queen Ariel's knight. From here on out, I shall be Master Rudeus's servant."

It sounded like Chandle was famous. Who could he be? He didn't seem like a great power. If anything, he kind of had pushover vibes. What famous people would Orsted know? Maybe he was related to the Dragon Clan—Holy Dragon Emperor Shirad, or Abyssal Dragon King Maxwell. But he didn't have the silver hair. Maybe he could have dyed it.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Orsted.

"He will serve you well. I myself was uneasy about sending you alone, and he is well suited to the task. He is unlikely to be a disciple, and I expect he will be good at gathering information."

Orsted sounded confident. I had to trust him. Ariel wouldn't appoint some weirdo to be captain of her knights just because of his connections, so he surely had some fighting chops.

"I won't let you down," Chandle said.

Let's think. Orsted said he's good at intelligence gathering, so maybe that's his specialty.

Orsted acted like it was a given that he knew about Chandle, and Chandle seemed to take it as a given that Orsted knew him—it checked out. I was nervous about working alone. On the other hand, I was also nervous about working with people I didn't know. With Orsted vouching for him, there was no need to be wary. Right? And Ariel herself had sent him.

Orsted had jumped on sending this guy—that meant he had to be both good at what he did and a safe choice. That's how Orsted must have judged it. If nothing else, Ariel trusted him enough to let him use the teleportation circles. That had to count for something.

Maybe I should trust Orsted and Ariel's assessment of him.

"All right," I said. "Please, come and join the meeting, though I'm afraid it's already wrapping up."

"Very well," Chandle replied.

I'll recap the whole strategy with them both, then I'll see what Ariel has to say about them, I thought, ushering the two mysterious knights into the meeting room.

Chapter 2: A Sought-After Item

THE BIHEIRIL KINGDOM was on the eastern edge of the Central Continent's northern region, surrounded by mountains, oceans, and forests. It had three great cities: the capital of Biheiril in the center, the second city of Ireilil at the edge of the forest to the south, and the third city of Heirulil on the ocean to the east.

There was nothing particularly unique about the kingdom. If you had to point to something, its domains were large considering how little influence it wielded with other nations. Despite being twice the size of its neighbor, their militaries were approximately equal in strength—even though the east of the northern lands remained the province of rival warlords to this day. The question was, how did the Biheiril Kingdom, with more land than it had the military strength to defend, avoid an invasion? The answer was the Ogre Tribe.

The Ogre Tribe lived on Ogre Island, a lonely rock sticking up out of the ocean. Their friendship with the Biheiril Kingdom ran deep.

Long, long ago—actually, it was after the end of Laplace's War and the founding of the Biheiril Kingdom, so fifty to a hundred years ago at most—anyway, back then, the Ogre Tribe on Ogre Island and the Human Clan on the edge of the northern lands kept to themselves. The ogres interacted a little with the humans who lived on the coast, but they definitely weren't swaggering about in human towns like they belonged there.

The Ogre Tribe had a problem. They were under attack by the Ocean Tribe. The Ogre Tribe were a warlike people and their pride made them loath to surrender to invaders, but the Ocean Tribe's strength was too great. The ogres fell one after another; and they were doomed to either be wiped out or become the Ocean Tribe's slaves.

That was when a party of adventurers came to their rescue. The adventurers had heard rumors that there was treasure to be found on Ogre Island. I didn't know anything about them individually, but their leader was

a human and there were four of them. Probably a knight, a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant—that's how the story goes, right?

Anyway, they arrived dreaming of treasure and ready to fight. What they found was the Ogre Tribe in dire straits. The invasion had depleted their numbers and their warriors were covered in fresh wounds. The women lived in fear and the children never smiled.

Seeing this, the adventurers were filled with a burning desire to put an end to it. They pledged then and there to help the Ogre Tribe. Together with the tribe's warriors, they ventured into the labyrinth where the Ocean Tribe was headquartered. After a brutal, life-or-death struggle, they slew the chief of the Ocean Tribe.

But they paid a great price. All of the human adventurers were killed save the knight who led them. Seeing this human knight mourning his fallen comrades, the Ogre God understood they owed a debt. He swore his lifelong friendship to the knight and pledged that the Ogre Tribe would come to his aid when he needed it.

That was when the shocking truth came to light. The knight was actually a prince from the newly emergent nation across the sea. The prince went home. When he became king, he made a treaty with the Ogre Tribe promising mutual protection. From then on, the Human Clan and the Ogre Tribe lived together in harmony.

At least, that's the founding myth of the Biheiril Kingdom. Setting aside for now how much of that actually happened, the point is that the Biheiril Kingdom was under the protection of the Ogre Tribe. Despite having more territory than it could defend and infertile lands, it survived without suffering foreign invasions. That's all there is worth knowing about the place, honestly.

We were headed for one of its cities: the Second City of Ireilil.

There were three of us: Chandle, the self-styled knight of Ariel in his ocher armor; Dohga, his subordinate in his gray armor; and me. I used the magical ring the two of them brought me to alter my appearance and wore the upgraded Magic Armor Version Two with plate armor over that. I also had a magical device Roxy'd developed on the back of the Version Two. If I

released magical energy while holding down a button at my waist, the scroll corresponding to that button would automatically activate. I had ten scrolls in total, five for each hand. Not having to get each scroll out one at a time was more convenient, but the scrolls were thick, and I had them folded up and strapped to my back like a schoolbag, ready to be deployed. That added some bulk. It made me look as though I was about to blast off like a rocket, so I'd dubbed it the Scroll Vernier.

It was Roxy's number two invention, after the Gatling Gun. Wearing the Magic Armor, the Scroll Vernier, and plate armor, with a cloak covering it all, made me look enormous—I was over two meters tall and covered in armor. The perfect disguise. My story went that I was a North God Style warrior, traveling around and taking on work as a bodyguard. I'd come to these parts for no particular reason and just casually asked if there were any strong guys around. Visually, it was supposed to look like Chandle was our leader, with two big guys following him. My cover name was Cray. We'd travel by carriage.

Right now, I was just one of three knights rattling about in the back of a wagon. All three of us were in heavy-duty armor. Sure, it was easy to spot us, but the makeup of our party wasn't so uncommon we'd garner attention. You didn't see many people in armor in the Magic City of Sharia, but in the Biheiril Kingdom, we passed quite a few folks in similar getups.

Right. While we're in transit, let's reacquaint ourselves with my other two companions, shall we?

First, there's Chandle von Grandour, captain of the Golden Knights of Asura. He used to be a traveling mercenary. After spending a long time in the conflict zone, he went to Asura for Ariel's coronation. Enchanted by her voice and her beauty, he tried all kinds of tactics to become her servant until at last she took notice of him, and he got a chance to give her his elevator pitch. That was how he obtained his current position. It sounded like he was just good at sucking up to authority, but Ariel wouldn't appoint a knight captain whose only talent was flattery. Something else must have caught her eye.

When I asked her for more information about him, she replied that he was upstanding and trustworthy, but didn't tell me anything about his true

identity. I could practically hear her laughing at me: *What, you don't know? Tee-hee, then I'm not telling!*

For now, his claim of being Ariel's knight wasn't fraudulent. That was good enough for me.

For a Golden Knight, his armor sure was dull. It looked sort of like gold in the right light, so maybe it just needed a polish? It was more yellow than golden. How about "The Yellow Knights"? That sounded impressive. Like Yellow 14 or something.

"But was there an order of Golden Knights in Asura?"

I remembered white and black knights, but I didn't remember gold.

"The order was created after Her Majesty's coronation," Chandle explained. "Our official duty is to serve as Queen Ariel's bodyguards, but we go anywhere and undertake any task Her Majesty gives us. We use the forbidden teleportation circles when we must."

Basically, they were Ariel's minions.

"The order's original purpose, from what I'm told, was 'to aid our allies,'" he went on.

"You don't say."

So Ariel had set them up for us. She had a strong sense of duty. A little frightening! What would she demand from me down the track? It'd be fine so long as Orsted handled it, but still...

"We're a newly established order and don't have many members yet, but we're elite. I might not look it, but I've dabbled in North God Style," Chandle said, smiling.

"In that case, I'd have thought that you'd carry a sword," I said.

"I thought *this* would be more effective." He twirled his golden metal staff. It looked a bit like an iron pipe. A staff fighter, then. Sword fighting was unusually advanced in this world. I think it was the influence of the Superd clan that made martial weapons with reach less popular. I'd never seen a staff fighter in this world until now. If he could handle North God Style, he'd be able to fight anything. There were even warriors a bit like ninja amongst the North God's followers—they weren't sword fighters either.

“A longer weapon gives you a great reach, huh?” I said.

“Right. Absolutely. Sword God Style fighters attack from impossible distances, and Water God Style fighters parry attacks from any distance. That’s what makes them strong. Why get hung up on swords? You might as well start off with a long-reaching weapon.”

A simple argument. In the world of my old life, that idea had gone unchallenged. Weapon ranges had extended further and further. This world wasn’t like that, though. If people started buying it, then the sword fighters who made up the majority of the warrior class would lose their respect. The strength of a sword fighter was that, in a world where healing magic could repair wounds instantly and was wielded by the difficult-to-kill creatures who roamed the wilds, they could cut down an enemy in a single blow.

In other words—and my apologies to Chandle—his argument for his staff was the poorly thought-out logic of a weak man. Maybe it was effective when he fought people, but I wouldn’t give him great odds against a monster with strong regenerative abilities.

“Dohga here is also in the Golden Knights.”

There was a long pause, then Dohga said, “...Uh-huh.”

Dohga didn’t have a surname. He was from the Donati region of the Asura Kingdom. He’d started off as a soldier in the Asuran army, guarding the gates of the capital city. Chandle, by then appointed as captain of the Golden Knights, had seen his potential and recruited him.

“You’re in charge of recruitment, then,” I said.

“Making the Golden Knights into the perfect knight order is all part of my job as captain. I’m still looking for strong, capable new members to welcome into our ranks.”

Part of the job, huh? I remembered the Blessed Child’s personal guard. Their captain, Therese, had been the weakest of them too. I guessed there was no requirement that the leader of an organization be the strongest. A talent for leadership was more important.

“But considering you’re called the Golden Knights, Dohga’s armor isn’t very golden.”

“Hahaha! Well, what do you expect? What kind of idiots would wear such obvious armor outside of official ceremonies?”

“Both of you stood out in the Asuran Palace.”

“Going to Her Majesty’s chambers is an appropriate occasion for that kind of finery. The Royal Knights are part of the queen’s symbolic authority. If she had some chump in drab armor guarding her chambers, it’d be scandalous. People would whisper that all the pomp and splendor of the Asura Kingdom is just surface level, that behind closed doors we’re just some thugs in rags. Shady characters. It’s imperative that the monarch be surrounded by glamor.”

Quite right. I’d been remiss in always showing up to see the queen in question in shabby robes. Except...what was I supposed to do? Her Majesty might look dazzling, but behind closed doors, she was consorting with shady characters—the rogues’ gallery of the Orsted Corporation.

“I’d better wear my best when I go to see her next, so no one thinks I’m shady,” I said.

“Oh, no, if you showed up in formalwear we’d wonder who died. Outside of official occasions, you should feel free to show up looking like a mess.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I retorted, but Chandle only laughed at me. I’ll admit he didn’t seem like a bad guy, but being a disciple of the Man-God didn’t have anything to do with good or bad. Orsted and Ariel might say he was all right, but I was going to keep an eye on him.

“This area doesn’t get much snow, does it?” Chandle said. I looked around. There was a light dusting of snow on the plains around us, but not enough to even slow down the cart. It seemed it was enough to put a halt to farm work. Around us, the bare earth was dug up and what looked like cultivated fields lay barren. Even from afar, you could tell that these lands were not fertile.

I’d imagined the northern lands as covered in snow at this time of year, but the Biheiril Kingdom got less than I’d expected. The wind was biting cold and the air was dry—there just wasn’t much snow.

“I wonder if it’s because of the mountains.”

“How are the mountains connected?”

“Maybe the clouds stop at the mountains to the west, so the snow doesn’t reach this far.”

“I see... Master Rudeus, you’re very learned.”

“I might be wrong, though.”

The weather in this world didn’t always correspond to what had been common knowledge in my past life. In the Great Forest, rain could fall for three months at a time, and deserts formed on continents that didn’t have any particular factors that led to desertification. It was totally possible that the mountains were unrelated, and there was some magic in the western forest that stopped the snow from falling.

“My grandfather was obsessed with that sort of thing,” said Chandle.

“Really? Was he studying something?”

“He wanted to know where clouds came from and where they went, what people were before they were born and where we go when we die. That kind of stuff. He’d spend whole days looking up at the sky, thinking.”

He sounded like a philosopher. Understandable. If I made it to old age, I thought I’d like to spend my days like that. Once I passed sixty, I’d sit around with Sylphie and Roxy, slowly going senile. Ah... Except Sylphie had elf blood and Roxy was a Migurd, so I guess they’d still look young. Eris would probably be as fit as she was now, even as a grandma... I supposed I’d have to go senile by myself.

“That’s very philosophical,” I said.

“Philosophical?”

“Philosophy is—oh! There’s a monster.”

“I’ll deal with it.”

We’d been attacked by monsters several times on the road. The Biheiril Kingdom was as forested as people said, and so the road occasionally ran right along the forest edge.

I’d gotten a look at my companions’ abilities on those occasions, and I had to admit I could tell the strongest warriors in the Asura Kingdom had skills. Chandle was nimble with masterful technique, and a single swing

from Dohga's giant axe took down his opponents. They were as strong as they looked, which was a fancy way of saying they weren't any more than that. Still, they were at least advanced-tier swordsmen. They'd be a liability in a fight against Great Powers, but they wouldn't get in my way on the road.

Shortly after I'd come to that conclusion, we arrived in the Second City of Irelil.

At first glance, the Second City of Irelil looked like any other city. It was surrounded by a wall, with merchant stalls lined up around its entrance. This world's favorite layout. I suppose it was notable that there were more wooden buildings here than in the Magic City of Sharia. The wooden structures, with their sharply angled roofs, were built to leave gaps between each building in case of fire. It made sense for a country surrounded by forests to be awash in timber.

We left the cart at a stable and walked along the street that led to our lodgings. I noticed that there weren't as many merchant stalls as I'd expected. Maybe there weren't enough customers to draw merchants. That would be the most logical explanation, but there were plenty of adventurers around to sell to. We'd passed plenty of armored warriors and robed magicians. The number of merchant stalls didn't match the number of adventurers. Was there a reason for that, or was it just ordinary deviation?

"Oops..." I'd been looking around me as I walked and almost crashed into another passerby. "Whoa..." The guy was *big*. Close to three meters tall. Even bundled up in my armor, I had to look up at him. If this world had half-giants, I'd bet they looked exactly like this.

His skin was a reddish brown, and his hair was reddish black. He was heavily muscled, and his arms, legs, and neck were thick as tree trunks. Of particular note was his head. It was enormous. His unusually large lower jaw jutted out, with two fangs protruding up from it. Two horns sprouted up from his messy hair. *This must be an ogre.*

“Watch yerself,” the ogre said as we almost collided. He continued on his way with barely a glance. He was carrying a massive load on his back, but it looked light compared with the bulk of its bearer. I’d never seen an ogre up close before. Formidable guys.

Here in the Biheiril Kingdom, ogres were free to roam as they pleased. The people of the kingdom didn’t seem to find it unusual. People treating another race as accepted countrymen wasn’t something I’d seen much in other places.

“Cray, don’t stare so much. You’re not some hick.”

“Huh? Oh, right...”

Chandle spoke in a sharp tone, totally different from how he’d talked during our journey. Part of the disguise, I guessed.

“There’s no one around here worth bothering with. You’re wasting your time looking.”

“If you say so.”

Right, we were North God warriors. I should only be showing interest in people who looked strong. Otherwise, our cover was for nothing.

“Let’s get rooms. Cray, Dohga? We good?”

“Yeah.”

“...Uh-huh.”

Dohga was the same as he’d been in the cart, but Chandle was in full role-play mode, as we’d discussed. Having Chandle act as leader also helped to conceal my presence.

Okay. I’m his sidekick, Cray. Occupation: soldier.

“A drink to our arrival, Chandle? Once lodging’s sorted, what do you say we head to the tavern and cut loose?”

“Ha! Just when I think you’re a real good-for-nothing, you come up with some damn fine ideas. You could learn from him, Dohga.”

“...Uh-huh.”

We headed for the inn.

It hit me the moment we entered the tavern. Something felt wrong.

“...Huh?”

The atmosphere was off. It wasn't like any other tavern I'd been to. As far as I could see, there was nothing unusual about it. There were a lot of adventurers, and quite a few townsfolk too. About one in five customers was an ogre, but that wasn't the source of my unease. It was less unusual for various races to mingle at a tavern than at other places in town.

So what was it?

People weren't staring. There weren't any suspicious types around or peculiar objects. Yet something was amiss.

“Something wrong, Cray?” Chandle asked.

“You don't feel something off about this place?” I asked. Chandle looked around, but he didn't seem to notice it.

“No,” he whispered. “Should we leave?”

“I want to know what's behind it.”

“Very well.” With that, Chandle strode into the bar with an almost reckless air and sat down at an empty table. I followed, half pushed along by Dohga. When Dohga sat down, the chair groaned under him. This despite how unusually large and sturdy the chairs in this tavern were. I usually had to take care when sitting down in the Magic Armor, but these looked like they'd hold up fine. Was that what I'd noticed? No, that'd be ridiculous.

While I was occupied with the chairs, Chandle caught a server's attention. “I'll order, all right?” he declared. Then he added, “Get us food and beer, and find us someone who knows the goings-on in these parts. Make it snappy. We've had a long journey and we're dog-tired. Ah, hold it, bring something weaker for the big guy. Fruit juice or milk—or water'll do, if that's all you have.” He tossed the server four copper coins.

“Coming right up, sirs!” The server was an ogre woman. Maybe that was why she was slimmer than the men. She was tall and big-breasted...but overall, she looked more humanlike. Maybe she was half. Was she...? No. She wasn't the source, either.

“Cray, come *on*! How many times do I have to tell you not to stare?”

“Sorry,” I said as Chandle’s finger jabbed my skull. “What was that for?”

“What’s that? You’re talking back to me now?” Though his tone was rough, there was no threat in Chandle’s eyes. He was just warning me that I was acting suspiciously.

“I’m not, I just... I’m all jittery.”

“Jittery? You feel like something bad’s about to happen?”

“Not...not bad...” It wasn’t unpleasant, what I was feeling. On the contrary, it felt like coming across something I’d been seeking for a long time... Surely I wasn’t going to find Geese or Ruijerd here, was I?

Jeez, thinking that only made me want to stare more. I wanted to get to the bottom of this already. The tavern was packed and rowdy, like any tavern anywhere, full of people laughing and quarreling with one another. Most were drinking and eating heartily. The food wasn’t anything out of the ordinary either, just a standard stew of fish from the river. Yet something niggled. There was something here they didn’t have in other taverns.

“I hear you three are looking for information.” While I was looking around, another man joined our table. He was human, with a narrow, ratlike face.

“You’re well informed about these parts?” Chandle asked.

“You want to know about this town, I’m your guy. I know how many adventuring parties are here, how the merchants get their wares. I could even tell you who the owner of the weapons shop is having an affair with.”

“Well then, tell us all of it. We’ve just arrived, and we don’t want trouble.” Chandle put a few copper coins in the man’s hand.

“That won’t buy you anything much worth knowing,” he said.

“Right now, I’m not asking for anything big. But once you show me you really are well connected around here...well, I might have work for you as a go-between down the line. Isn’t that right?” Chandle directed the last question at me, so I assumed a devil-may-care grin. I was wearing the face of a fearsome Ruquag mercenary, so it should have been pretty menacing.

“Oof, that’s a fright,” the informant muttered, leaning away from me. He turned back to Chandle and said, “All right, what do you wanna know?”

“I want to know what the customs are around here. Territory, geography, who I shouldn’t make an enemy of... Oh, and if there’s anything happening that might lead to work.”

“All right.”

We didn’t ask about Geese right away. It wouldn’t do to be too eager. We were just warriors—vagabonds passing ourselves off as mercenaries. Some demon small-timer was nothing to do with us.

“So far as customs go, there’s no hard rules. You can live in this town so long as you follow the law. Ah, only thing is, there are a lot of ogres. Best to watch how you act around them. Humans in this country are friendly with them, so even if you’re devout followers of Millis or something, you’d best keep any insults to the Ogre Tribe to yourselves.”

“What’d happen if I insulted them?”

“People won’t sell to you, inns won’t give you rooms. The landlady at this place is an ogre. You might get banned from the premises or served rotten food.”

The Ogre Tribe were cherished neighbors. Any insult to the Ogre Tribe was felt more keenly by the humans than by the ogres themselves. Even in Sharia, there was a lot of tolerance for other races, but they were still segregated. People didn’t live mingled together like they did here.

“As for geography... To give you a general idea, to the north you’ve got the capital, then there’s one village to the south. It’s tiny—doesn’t even have a name—but a few woodcutters live there, and they can hold their own against monsters. To the southeast, there’s a labyrinth. If you want its exact location...it’ll cost you.”

“Tell me.” Chandle held out another few copper coins and got the location of the labyrinth. We weren’t going to go, but there was no harm in knowing.

The man returned to Chandle’s other questions. “The ones you shouldn’t make enemies of are the ogres, like I said before. In this country, ogres and humans are treated the same. Apart from that... Right, yeah. It’s not a person, but there’s a place you should avoid. The Earthwyrn Ravine.”

The Earthwyrn Ravine. Important location alert! Ruijerd was supposed to be in a village near that valley.

“The ravine is in the middle of a deep forest called the Forest of No Return. They say that invisible devils have been showing up there since long ago, so it’s forbidden to enter.”

“Invisible devils?”

“Just old wives’ tales to scare children. As you can guess from the name, there are Earth Dragons living in the Earthwyrn Ravine. If some dumb adventurers went into the forest and messed with their dens, we could end up with a whole flock of angry, vicious Earth Dragons razing the country... I reckon that’s why it’s forbidden.” The man frowned, seeming to remember something. “I say that, but not so long ago—well, it was about a year ago now, but there were rumors that devils emerged from the Forest of No Return.”

“Oh?”

“The chief of this town formed a survey team and sent them into the forest. Only, they didn’t come back. Not even after the survey was supposed to have ended. There were all kinds of rumors. Some said the invisible devils got ’em, others said they’d stumbled into the Earth Dragon’s nest. Others said no way, they’d just been eaten by ordinary monsters. It turned out they weren’t all dead. Right when the Chief gave up the first survey team for dead and sent in another team, one of them turned up out of the blue.” Here, the man leaned forward and fixed me with a deadly serious expression.

Dude, this feels like a horror story, I thought. What’re you looking at me for? Look at Chandle.

“He was out of his mind, poor chump. He must have seen something that really scared him. The chief asked what had happened, but he only stared into space, muttering ‘The devils, the devils...’ They say the chief was so frightened, he gave up on sending any more survey teams. He announced that the survey team was eaten by Earth Dragons and put a gag order on the whole business, so we’re forbidden from speaking about it... The truth’s shrouded in darkness to this day, shelved as an unsolved mystery. That was...about six months back.”

Our breath hitched in our chests as the man continued with his tale. “Well, if only it had ended there. Recently, the story reached the ears of the king. His Majesty was outraged. ‘There’s a village nearby!’ he cried. ‘How can you abandon them without finding out what happened?’ He said he’d send a hunting party. Even as we speak, they’re assembling folks who know how to fight in the capital.” The man looked up. “And it’s no secret why. There’s a special reward of ten Biheiril gold pieces for whoever uncovers the truth about the devils and kills them. Sounds like there might be a job in there for you, doesn’t it?”

Okay, invisible devils. That wasn’t quite the same as what I’d heard about the Ruijerd sighting... Maybe the truth was something like this: first, Ruijerd had gone to the village for some reason, and they’d labeled him as a devil. Someone started saying “A devil appeared near the Forest of No Return,” and that got mixed up with the rumor that invisible devils lived in the Forest of No Return and turned into “Invisible devils came out of the Forest of No Return.” As the rumor picked up embellishments along the way, the original information had gotten twisted. Luckily, the Mercenary Band’s information network had gotten the story before it got jumbled. It probably helped that they’d been on the lookout for something specific.

Of course, it could also have happened in the opposite order. Something like “An invisible devil really appeared.” “Devils? That sounds like the Superd Clan.” “Now that you mention it, the guy who appeared had green hair.”

Actually, never mind. That wouldn’t explain the part about him buying medicine. I mean, there wasn’t any rhyme or reason to how rumors garbled information. Anyway, medicine hadn’t figured in this stranger’s story. Could Ruijerd really have wiped out a whole survey team without arousing suspicions, though? Why would he do such a thing? Was there something in the forest he didn’t want people to see or know about?

“That so...” Chandle said thoughtfully. “A fine story. Right, Cray? Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, devils, huh...? That *is* interesting. I like the sound of ten gold pieces too.” I answered vaguely, my head full of other things. I needed to go to that forest. With all this information coming out, I couldn’t believe Ruijerd wasn’t involved. “You said whoever kills the devils gets the reward,

so that means whoever gets in first wins, right? Everyone'll be going for it in parties, but we're not adventurers. We'll want support if we go for it."

"Good point." Chandle gave me a conspiratorial look. "Maybe he can find us someone... All right, my well-informed friend. Here's the fee for your next job." He put another stack of copper coins in front of the man. "Find us a thief. I want someone with a lot of adventuring skills: the more skilled at digging up information, the better. Doesn't matter if they're not much of a fighter; we've got that covered. The pay... Let's see. Ah, screw it. If you find someone, send them our way and we'll hash out the details."

"You on a deadline?"

"Well, so long as we're in time for the hunting party... That's still a way off, yeah?"

"A month away."

"All right, let's say ten days from now, in this tavern. That work for you?"

"You've got yourself a deal." The man took the coins and quickly emptied them into his pocket. Then he rose abruptly and a moment later he was gone, melted away into the crowded tavern.

Not bad, Chandle.

We'd learned about the forest and got a lead on hunting for Geese. Okay, we didn't get to ask about the North God, but it hadn't fit naturally into the conversation. I'd like to learn how to do that myself a bit more.

"You're good at this," I told him.

"My wife has a talent for this sort of negotiation. I picked it up naturally by watching her."

A married man. I really had to make sure I got him home safe, then.

Crap, stay in character.

I cleared my throat. "So, what now?"

"We have to wait for him to come back, but I don't just want to sit around for ten days... Shall we go on a little excursion? Oy, Dohga, anywhere you want to go?"

"...Wood cutters."

“Well, then. Shall we do a little scouting and stop off at the village to the south?” Chandle suggested. We acted like we were deciding here and now, but we’d already decided to go to the village to the south. We had ten days. The village was only a day or so away. Tomorrow morning I’d set up a teleportation circle and a contact tablet, then we’d head to the village. Tomorrow or the next day, we’d go into the forest, then spend five or six days searching. After that, we’d come back, meet our informant, and hear what he had on Geese. Then we’d report back the results of our investigation via the tablet.

“Here you are. Hope I didn’t keep you waiting!” It was the ogre woman with our order: fish stew and beer. She set down a cup of some dark liquid in front of Dohga, presumably non-alcoholic. It didn’t look very appetizing, but I was curious. I’d ask for a sip in a moment.

Now, we were on an urgent mission so I didn’t plan on getting sloshed, but not drinking in a tavern would draw attention too. I’d have a single drink.

“All right, boys, to our great success!” Chandle toasted.

“Cheers!”

“...Cheers.”

I raised my cup to theirs, then took a gulp. The drink was rich and it burned as it went down, but the aftertaste was smoo—

“Blegh!” Dohga spat out the black liquid. He was coughing and spluttering.

“Whoa!”

The people around us turned to look as Dohga coughed, face down on the table. Frantically, I put a hand on his back and murmured a detoxification spell. Dohga only stared at the ground, a string of drool dangling from his mouth.

“Hey, hang in there!”

Shit, what did they make him drink?! Poison?! I knew it, I felt something off, I knew there was something wrong! Even if I’m still not totally sure what it is...! Will the detoxification work? Stay calm, the first

thing you do in these situations is to stay calm. First, I need to know what kind of poison he drank...

“What the hell did you give him?!” Chandle demanded, rounding on the server.

“I’m so sorry!” she gasped.

Forcing myself to stay cool, I reached for Dohga’s cup and—*Huh? Don’t I know that smell?*

“Your friend is a human? From his size, I just assumed he was an ogre. I’m very sorry.”

“Just tell me what the hell you gave him!”

I dipped a finger into the liquid, then licked it. Oh yeah, I knew that flavor all right.

“Um, it’s a drink made from beans. Very popular with ogres, but it’s too strong for humans so we water it down for you. I really am so sorry!”

“It’s not poison?!”

“Um, well, it can be, if humans drink too much of it... But not a single mouthful.”

“Damnit! Dohga! Hey, Dohga! Can you hear me?”

Chandle was worked up, but I had fully regained my composure. Now I thought about it, this was the smell that had been hanging about the tavern since we came in. It was probably in the fish stew, too. This was what felt off. I knew what the drink was. It was true, it was poisonous if you drank too much, but Dohga had only had a mouthful, and he’d spat most of it out. He might not feel great afterward, but there wouldn’t be any lasting consequences.

I dipped my finger into the liquid and licked it off again.

Yep. That’s it, for sure. I’d know it anywhere.

This is soy sauce.

Chapter 3: A Sought-After Person

LET'S RECAP! I, Rudeus, pulled out my money and bought a bottle of soy sauce on the spot. Onward!

The next day, we went to the outskirts of the Second City of Irelil, set up a teleportation circle and a contact tablet, then headed for the village where Ruijerd had been sighted.

The village was half a day's journey from Irelil, situated near the Earthwyrms Ravine in the Biheiril Kingdom. It was known as the Earthwyrms Ravine Village, or sometimes the Forest of No Return Village, but the kingdom's official name for it was Marson Village. Even though it was on documents and other official stuff, most people didn't know the name "Marson." I might as well call it Earthwyrms Ravine Village.

There was nothing much going on there. It didn't produce anything special, nor did it have any sightseeing spots. They cut down trees to grow vegetables in the fertile soil around the forest, but unlike Buena Village in Fittoa, people hadn't gathered to live there for any particular purpose. People had been living there since long ago, and they had integrated into the Biheiril Kingdom. The nation didn't come first, the people did. That sort of thing.

Bleak, deserted, with empty spaces between the houses and no signs of life—that's what I expected to find, but I was in for a surprise. When we arrived, the village was so full of life I had to triple-check that it was the remote and desolate place we'd set out for.

It was obvious just looking at the crowd gathered at the village's entrance that they weren't locals. They wore armor and swords hung at their belts. Adventurers? But no, adventurers didn't have that dangerous air about them. These were mercenaries, or maybe bounty hunters.

"Chandle, you think everyone's trying to get a head start?"

After his work at the tavern yesterday, on top of how he'd performed during our journey, I'd decided I could rely on Chandle. Up until now, I hadn't been fully convinced of his usefulness. Now I could see why Orsted had put him with me. I wanted his input every step of the way on this sort of thing.

Dohga, on the other hand, wasn't very useful at all. He wasn't actively holding us back, but...I did get the sense he was barely keeping up. But then, who was I to go evaluating people? He'd probably prove himself useful in some way or another.

"No, I'd assume they're scoping out the area. Any information you can get gives you an advantage at the starting line."

"But some of them probably want to get the target before the others start though, right?"

"Perhaps, but there won't be many. The kingdom is leading this hunt, so even if you got in first and killed the devils, you might not get paid."

You had to go through the proper process. You joined the hunting party, went into the forest alongside the kingdom's knights or whoever they were sending, uncovered the true nature of the devils, killed them, then confirmed all was well. Only after all *that* did you have a shot at receiving the reward. If you went in alongside everyone else, whether or not you got the special reward came down to a battle of luck. These guys were here scoping things out to take luck out of the equation. When the right moment came, they'd pounce and snatch the prize.

"Nothing to do with us, then."

"I agree with you entirely."

Smiling, Chandle headed into the village. There, we found a building that looked like an inn and a town square packed with far too many people for such a small place. I guessed everyone was raring to go.

Having more people around was convenient for us. We'd blend into the crowd and see what we could learn.

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than someone yelled, "Get out!" An eviction order out of nowhere! Obviously, they weren't

talking to me. The voice came from a corner of the square. A few of the folks who'd come to scope out the scene slunk away, disgruntled. I saw an old woman with a cane yelling at them.

"Get out and back where you came from! No devil's going to appear! It protects the People of the Forest! Anyone who'd harm the People of the Forest can clear off!"

She tottered forwards, leaning on her cane, but when she drew near to the crowd of men, she began hitting them with it. From where I stood, I heard the *crack* as the cane struck.

"Stupid old—"

"Hey, cool it. If you make trouble, the ogres..."

The man she'd hit spat. He'd been about to draw his sword in rage but, held back by his companion, he settled for striding out of the square.

The old woman didn't chase after them. Yelling, she laid into the rest of the men there. They all backed away from her, then dispersed.

What was going on? After seeing everyone else off, the old woman—aw geez, she was looking at us.

She headed straight for us, yelling "Get back where you came from!" Her cane hit my armor with a *clang*. It didn't do any damage. That's right, folks, with Asura-approved full armor, you're even protected against ferocious granny attacks.

"You mustn't disturb the forest!" She continued beating away at my armor.

"Whoa, there, Grandma."

"There's no devil! After all he's done for the People of the Forest! After he came seeking help, you'll kill him? Brutes!" She'd worked herself up into a frenzy and wasn't listening to me.

But one phrase caught my attention. *People of the Forest*. That was a new term. I wanted to know more about it.

"Who are the People of the Forest?"

"When the people of the forest leave, the devils come!"

Did that mean the people of the forest, whoever they were, kept the devils at bay?

“The devils and the People of the Forest are different, then?”

“Of course they are! Don’t even speak of them together!”

“Leave it, Cray,” Chandle cut in, trying to defuse the situation. “She might not even be in her right mind.” He had a point. Totally sane people didn’t go up to strangers and start hitting them with a stick. I still wanted to hear what she had to say.

“I’m sane as they come, and the People of the Forest are real! When I was young, I lost my way deep in the forest, and they saved me! And long, long before that, they saved my great-grandpa too!”

“When I was young” had to mean at least twenty, even thirty years ago. This old woman looked a little over sixty. And if she was that old, the story about her great-grandpa had to be from around a century before that.

Ruijerd and I had only parted ways ten years ago. Could it be that Ruijerd had nothing to do with this?

But... *Oh*.

“The People of the Forest are no devils! Why can’t you all see it? Why do you try to kill them? Fools! Fools, go home! Fools...fools, all of you...” After beating her stick against my armor for a while, the old woman’s breathing grew ragged and she sank to the ground.

“Why don’t you tell us what’s really going on?” I asked.

Ruijerd might not be here, but there was another possibility.

“One of these People of the Forest might be a friend of mine.”

Maybe in the forest we would find another survivor of the Superd Tribe who was searching for Ruijerd.

The old woman had been totally possessed by her fury, but once she’d calmed down a bit, she talked to us. From what she told us, it wasn’t

clear whether the devil in question was Ruijerd or another Superd. However, I did get a sense of how events in the Biheiril Kingdom had led to this.

Since before the old woman was born, a race known as the People of the Forest had lived in the Forest of No Return. They rarely ventured out into the world, but very, very occasionally, when a villager lost their way in the forest or ran afoul of a monster and was on the verge of death, they would appear and help. None of the villagers, the old woman included, knew what they were. They only had a folktale to go by.

Long, long ago, just after the end of the war with the Demon God, invisible devils roamed the Forest of No Return. The devils came to the village at dusk, stole children and livestock, and devoured them. The villagers wanted to stop the devils, but what could they do against an invisible enemy? They passed their days in fear. That was when the People of the Forest appeared. They had a proposal for the villagers.

“In exchange for letting us live in the forest, we will take care of the devils. But you must never tell anyone of our existence.”

The villagers agreed and the People of the Forest went into the depths of the woods. How they drove the devils away, the villagers didn’t know, but the devils no longer came out of the forest after that. Even now, the People of the Forest continued to protect the villagers.

From when they were very small, the children of the village were told to be grateful to the People of the Forest and to never speak of them to anyone.

Finishing her story, the old woman said, “It’s unthinkable that the People of the Forest would disturb the forest.”

I didn’t know if anything she was told us was true. Most folktales are just stories.

Let’s assume, just for the sake of argument, that the People of the Forest *were* Superd. Superd folk had a third eye in their forehead, a kind of Demon Eye that let them sense living things. Monsters that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye would be no trouble for them. Cleverly concealing their existence, the Superd had lived in harmony with the villagers. Then, half a year ago, they’d been struck by tragedy. A plague or injury. Maybe a great

horde of invisible devils had appeared, too many for the People of the Forest to fight off. After all these years of never showing themselves, the Superd had come to the village to buy medicine. No one remembered the exact merchant who'd sold it to them, but the story had spread. Something suspicious had come out of the forest in broad daylight. I'm sure the villagers were happy to accommodate him. *If* the story of seeking help was true, of course. Somehow, it had gotten twisted until it turned into the story we'd heard in the tavern yesterday.

"The devils came out of the forest. They must be driven away."

How had the story gotten so snarled? We were talking about events a year back, so suspecting Geese felt like jumping to conclusions, but...I wouldn't be surprised if he were involved somehow.

What mattered was that I was certain there were Superd in the depths of the forest. At the same time, new doubts bubbled up. Why hadn't I known? I'd been searching for Ruijerd. Everyone knew I was looking. *Everyone*. That included, for example, Orsted with his supernatural foresight. If there had been Superd here for such a long time, then *why*? Why didn't I know about them?

The Forest of No Return was quiet. Forests in this world were usually full of monsters. It depended on the concentration of magic, but during a day in the forest, you'd encounter at least one. Especially Treants. They were everywhere in this world, but they were particularly common in forests. Forests might as well be Treant nests, you ran into them so often. There was no sign of them in this forest, though. It was truly quiet.

It was peaceful and totally silent. I could just tell that there were birds and small animals about, but that was all. It was eerie, like walking through a nightmare.

"This is creepy." The forest was making Chandle uneasy too.

"Yeah."

Dohga was quiet. He didn't seem bothered. He didn't look around at all.

We walked on for a while in silence, heading deeper into the forest. I noticed fewer and fewer animals as we went. There were insects and birds, but no small mammals.

We walked on. The trees around us were vast now, their densely packed leaves blocking out the sky. In the gloom, I was gripped by the crazy idea that we were the only living things here. Only the occasional birdcall shook me out of it.

I started to wonder if, even now, invisible devils were on our tail. I turned to look back over my shoulder. Each time this happened, I met Dohga's innocent gaze and looked ahead again. It was only my imagination, I told myself.

"Hey, look." My eyes found a stone tablet on the side of the road. It was a monument to the Seven Great Powers. Once upon a time, I wouldn't have understood any of the markings on this monument... I recognized pretty much all of them now. As usual, there was no change in the rankings. There was a new Sword God, but the mark hadn't changed.

"I didn't expect to see one of these here."

"It's not all that uncommon. Monuments to the Seven Great Powers only crop up in places where the magical energy is strong enough."

"Oh, right... I guess they are magical implements."

Impressive that he knew that. Not many were aware that this sort of magical implement could only be set up in places with a high enough concentration of magical energy. It wasn't a closely guarded secret or anything, though; it just took a little knowledge.

"It'll be getting dark soon. What do you say to camping here?"

"Good idea. All right, Dohga, firewood."

"Uh-huh."

We camped for the night near the monument. Just in case, I made a shelter using Earth Fortress.

The next day, we ventured deeper still into the quiet forest.

Along the way, Chandle said, with the air of a sudden realization, “This place reminds me of the Red Wyrms Mountains.”

“How so?”

“The other animals stay away out of fear of the dragon.”

To people, monsters might look like they just blindly attacked anything that moved. They were more intelligent than you’d expect. They knew not to go near the territories of stronger beasts.

The Earthworm Ravine lay deep in the forest. It hardly needed to be said that Earth Dragons were extremely powerful. It was natural for wild animals to avoid such a dangerous place.

“You’ve been to the Red Wyrms Mountains, Chandle?”

“Just the foothills. Just like here, the closer you got, the fewer animals there were around.”

Earth Dragons made their nests on valley cliffs. As a rule, they didn’t venture out of their valley. They didn’t fly either, but they did use earth magic to dig tunnels. They were amiable for dragons and didn’t attack people so long as you didn’t trespass on their territory. They also had a curious quirk where they paid little heed to attackers coming from above but were excessively aggressive to anyone who came from below.

Orsted had told me that Earth Dragons and Red Wyrms were natural enemies. Due to their entirely different habitats, however, the two species hardly ever encountered one another.

That was the creature we were currently making our way toward, but I wasn’t worried. So long as we stayed off the valley floor, we’d be fine.

“Oh!”

While we were talking, the scenery opened ahead of us. The ground before us suddenly dropped away into a sheer cliff in the middle of the forest. It was so deep I couldn’t see the bottom. The opposite side of the valley was about four or five hundred meters away. It felt like standing on top of a mountain.

I didn’t know much about valleys, but the scale of this one made me think of the Grand Canyon.

“I suppose this is Earthwyrn Ravine?”

“I imagine so. What do you want to do? We’ve arrived here safe and sound...”

“Hmmm.” As I thought, I concentrated magical energy in my left eye. Now that the view was less impeded, I could use the Eye of Distant Sight.

First, I scoped out the valley floor. I was still getting the hang of operating the Eye so I couldn’t tell how far it was to the bottom, but I saw it easily. The valley floor was covered in moss and fungi, all glowing blue-white. Nearby, a sort of lizard with a shell like a boulder bumbled along slowly.

I assumed that was an Earth Dragon. It looked more like a Great Tortoise than a dragon. Maybe with that shell, it could withstand a Red Wyrn. It could afford to not pay attention to anything above it. I focused and saw there were more Earth Dragons clinging to the cliff face. Kinda gross.

Next, I used the Demon Eye to survey our surroundings. As far as I could see, there was nothing to our right. Eventually, the cliff and the forest obstructed my line of sight. On the map, the Earthwyrn Ravine was perfectly straight, but now that we were here, I could see its curvature. The map was wrong.

Then I looked left. I couldn’t see anything on this side ei... *Wait a minute.*

“That’s a swing bridge,” I said.

A bridge spanned the chasm as a point where the valley narrowed.

“So it is!” Chandle agreed. “We’re going beyond, then?”

“Let’s see what we find.”

We had seven days until the information broker came back to us. Taking time for the return journey into account, we could keep going into the forest for another day or two.

Decision made, we set off along the valley edge.

The bridge looked ready to collapse. It was basically two thick vines stretched from one side to another at a narrow point of the valley, with wooden planks laid across it.

It looked very...hand-made. I didn't have much confidence in its sturdiness.

Still, it looked like a single adult carrying supplies would be all right.

"Shall we cross?"

If I tried it in the Magic Armor, I was going to fall. I couldn't do something as stupid as falling in a place where I'd been *told* we'd be fine so long as we didn't fall.

"I don't like the look of this bridge."

"You want to go back, then?"

"Let's use a different bridge," I said, going to the edge of the cliff. If the bridge was too unstable for me to cross, I'd just make one myself. Magic flowed from my hand to the ground, summoning earth. I repurposed Earth Lance for the task.

Strong enough to hold me without any issues. I focused on that thought, imagining a lance big enough to reach the opposite cliff.

"Wow," Chandle breathed.

I released the magic, and the Earth Lance materialized. It extended silently, then impaled the opposite side of the valley without a sound. I produced another two lances. For peace of mind, I spaced them far enough apart for two people to pass one another. Then I laid planks over the top, made from the same earth. They were sturdy, extending all the way to the far side.

I finished it off by reinforcing the bridge's foundation and underside with earth magic.

There was no handrail... That was okay, we'd get by.

"Amazing," Chandle said, checking out my work. "I'd heard stories, but nothing like this."

I let myself bask in the flattery for a moment, but I couldn't relax just yet. I didn't know the first thing about bridge construction. I didn't need to

go through iterations or anything before setting foot on it, but if it looked likely to fail under the weight of the Magic Armor, I'd need to remake it.

"Let's get a rope."

I fastened one to a nearby tree, then tentatively stepped out onto the bridge. I'd have looked like the king of all morons if I'd fallen then, but it held beneath me. Adding reinforcement to points that seemed structurally weak as I went, I inched across the bridge.

The rope ran out along the way. I linked the rope Chandle carried, and we made it to the other side with that.

Each rope was around fifty meters long, so given that two had barely been enough to get across, the bridge had to be around a hundred meters. Even here, where the ravine had narrowed, it was still a *long* way.

"All right." I fixed the rope to a tree, then signaled over to the other side of the ravine.

Chandle and Dohga set off at a leisurely pace, holding onto the rope. Both at once. Weren't they worried that the bridge might collapse? Maybe they trusted me. If they fell, I'd have to move fast to help them. Despite my worries, they both made it safely across.

"Let's get going then, shall we?" said Chandle. "We'd best be on our guards from here on out." We peered into the depths of the forest. It was dark in there among the trees, and I sensed something I hadn't in the forest we'd traversed so far—here, there were monsters.

We hadn't gone a hundred meters before we were ambushed. I heard it first: the rustling of leaves brushing against each other. There was a breeze, so it didn't occur to me that there might be a monster nearby. It felt like something far away was drawing nearer—something so far away that I assumed we were safe. Next thing I knew, I heard it right next to my ear.

"Huwh... Huwh..." A warm, rancid wetness slid over my nose. *Something* was clinging to the trunk of the tree right beside me. No sooner had I noticed it than the tree flexed and the branches rustled. A moment later, something heavy dropped down behind me.

I whirled around and saw Dohga lying on his back. I didn't see anything else. Dohga's head was twitching uncontrollably and his hands grasped at the air as though to hold off whatever was moving his head.

There's something there. I didn't use magic, just punched whatever was on top of Dohga with all the strength I could muster. The supernaturally strengthened fist of the magic armor sent the assailant flying. I felt flesh and bone crush. The thing hit a tree trunk with a splatter of red blood. The color of the blood revealed its shape.

It was a four-legged beast. I couldn't make out any distinguishing features, but it had four legs. Reflexively, I blasted it with a Stone Cannon to finish it off. At basically the same moment, something slammed into my back. I turned, ready to hit back with magic.

"Dohga! Get up!"

It was Chandle. He'd positioned himself to protect my back.

"...Uh-huh!" Dohga stood up and came over to stand right in front of me, pulling his axe off his back.



Guys, c'mon! I can't see anything!

"The enemy is invisible, numbers unknown! Dohga, eyes are no good here—use your ears! Just deal with the enemy in front of you! Master Rudeus, you use magic! Area of effect spells to burn them all!" Chandle barked, rattling off instructions. He was a quick thinker. I guess he *was* captain of a knight order, after all. I did as I was told and concentrated magic in my hands.

Let's go with fire magic! Wait, no, this was a forest. It'd be twice the work putting out a fire. I'd use water magic—Frost Nova.

"...Oof!" A fraction of a second before I could get a spell off, Dohga swung.

The blade of the enormous battleax swept through the thick forest, splitting tree trunks as it went. It didn't find its mark. Through a cloud of splinters, I sensed something slip past Dohga and come at me.

The Magic Armor was heavy and hard. A monster's fangs and talons wouldn't leave a mark on it. Mind made up, I got ready to cast my spell...

"Master Rudeus!" Chandle crashed into me. I didn't even have time to think *What the hell?* before the spear shot past me. It seemed to be suspended in mid-air. Then I realized it was pinning something transparent to the ground. The spear was white—pure, chalky white. Like animal bone.

There was something evocative about it.

Then a man dropped down to the ground to retrieve the spear. He had green hair and skin so pale he looked ill. He wore a folk outfit a bit like a poncho.

Yeah, no question. Just from his back, I knew—I'd know him anywhere!

"Ruijerd!" I called, standing up and spreading my arms. He picked up the spear, then turned to me.

"Hm?"

There was a pause. "Huh?"

I didn't know him. He was handsome and looked a bit like Ruijerd, but it wasn't him. The Ruijerd I knew was more...like, there was something

about his jaw...

"I'm sorry, my mistake," I said.

Shit. I did anticipate that there might be other Superd around...but this isn't the Superd I ordered!

Ah, crap, I went and blurted out Ruijerd's name. Boy, my face is red.

"...You know Ruijerd?" the unknown Superd asked wonderingly.

Oh, right. He's a Superd, so he'll know Ruijerd. Plus, it doesn't matter that he's not Ruijerd. Like...with all the trouble the Biheril Kingdom is facing lately, this being a different Superd means...absolutely nothing. Yeah? Yep.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. He's an ally...no, a friend. I owe him."

"If you are here for him, follow me. I'll take you to him." The man turned to leave.

"Um... Just a minute!" I called after him, dazed. "Is he *here*, then?"

The Superd nodded as though it were obvious. "He is."

Chapter 4: The Superd Village

THE VILLAGE WAS A LOT LIKE the Migurd Village. Rows of roughly hewn log houses stood within a fence that rose roughly two meters high around the village perimeter. Near the log houses, there was a modestly sized plot used to grow crops. Unlike in the Migurd village, a wide variety of vegetables grew there. They probably had good soil.

The carcass of a freshly butchered animal sat behind one of the houses. It was a four-legged beast with pale fur. This was the true form of the invisible monsters. Apparently, once they'd been dead for a while, they stopped being invisible. The body of the one that had attacked us had a colorful pelt after it died.

They were called Invisible Wolves. Just what it said on the box. In the center of the village sat a spring, and nearby a group of people gathered around a big cooking pot getting food ready. Their culture really was similar to the Migurds. But everyone who hailed from the Migurd Tribe looked like a junior high school student with blue hair. Here, everyone had a red gemstone on their forehead and hair of an emerald-green hue.

They were Superd.

Here, I made a new and surprising discovery. Superd didn't just all have red gemstones on their foreheads and emerald-green hair... They were also all beautiful. In this world, people tended to consider stronger, better-defined features attractive. Still, the Superd were beautiful. They weren't typical slender hunks or babes, but they were all good-looking.

There was a girl over there with a bob who was *super* cute. She was slim, although she wasn't that tall. Her shoulders were muscular, her eyes were full of determination. Decently large breasts, too. It was like someone had combined Eris and Sylphie's best points...

Wait, it's not like that! I'm not thinking about cheating. Just looking objectively.

A village of beauties. This was diabolical. Aha! The People of the Forest were devils after all! Here was the proof!

“This place is terrifying,” I said under my breath.

“...Uh-huh.” Dohga grunted in agreement.

Dohga was crouching behind me as though he was trying to hide. He seemed scared of the Superd. He was from Asura, so he’d likely grown up hearing that the Superd were a bunch of devils. I wanted to reassure him, but while the Superd weren’t evil as a people, that didn’t mean this village would welcome us. I couldn’t tell anyone to relax yet.

“I wonder where they’re taking us?” Chandle wasn’t particularly scared. Being from the conflict zone, he likely didn’t know the myths about the Superd. Surrounded by all of them now, he looked excited if anything.

“To Ruijerd, where else?”

“He may not take us to our final destination first.”

I contemplated that. “Then the usual pattern would be the village head, right?”

“If we’re talking about stories, a jail cell is another option...but it doesn’t feel like we’re in danger.”

The Superd warrior had turned to us and said curtly, “Follow me,” before walking off again.

We’d followed as we were told, and that was how we’d arrived at this village. There hadn’t been much you could call conversation in the meantime.

“The villagers seem out of spirits, don’t they?” Chandle remarked. Now that he mentioned it, the Superd did seem down. Every person I saw had an unhealthy tinge to their skin, and some were coughing as they prepared food. The children, on the other hand, looked healthy. They chased after one another, laughing and shouting, their tails trailing behind them.

Huh. So Superd children had tails.

“I’d expect a few more people around in a village of this size.”

“They’re probably out hunting, aren’t they?”

“Surely not when they’re butchering their catch over there?”

“Oh, fair point.”

They were cutting up the beast right now, so that meant they must have come home from hunting. There might have been individual groups rather than one big village hunting party, and the beast over there might have been preserved, but...

“I suppose they are sick, after all.”

It wasn't immediately apparent, but it did seem like some strange cold was spreading through the village. Knowing that one of them had gone to buy medicine might be what had me thinking that way. They did seem sick.

Maybe we ought to be wearing masks, even if it's only for peace of mind.

“Nearly there. Keep moving.” We arrived at a house, prodded along by our Superd guide. It looked like the oldest one here, but it was also the biggest in the village. Classic village-chief template.

“Chief, it is I. I bring visitors for Ruijerd,” said the Superd man. He opened the door to reveal a hall. It looked more like an auditorium or a meeting hall than a chief's house.

Inside were five Superd. They were more subdued than the lone one who had brought us here, which made me think they were elderly. It was hard to guess their age when all of them had the same green hair, pale skin, and beautiful features.

One of the five jumped to his feet as I entered the room. That familiar traditional costume. The scar on his face. The white spear. The forehead protector I knew so well. His hair had grown out, so he wasn't bald anymore. *This time* there was no question.

“Ruijerd!” I cried, breaking into a smile. I was so glad to see him after all this time that I wanted to run over to him, but I restrained myself and stopped after just a few steps.

But Ruijerd looked at me with suspicion in his eyes. “Rudeus...?”

Had he forgotten me? That'd be heartbreaking.

“...You don't remember me?” I asked.

“No, you just don’t look like I remember.”

“Oh! Right, yeah, I’m kind of in disguise.” I took the ring off to show him my real face. A murmur ran through the chief and the others.

It was impressive he’d recognized me with that face. Or it would have been, if not for the Superd’s third eye.

“It’s been a long time.”

“It really has.”

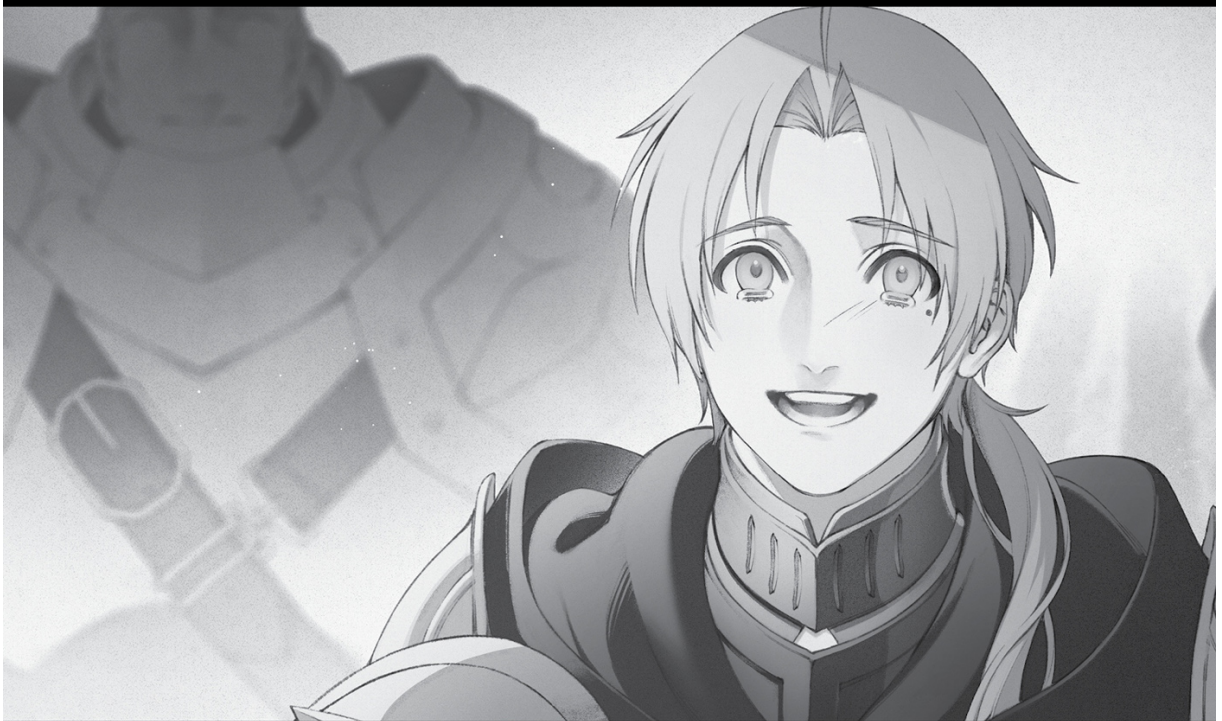
Ahh, this was just like old times. There was so much I wanted to say, so much I wanted to tell him. About Eris, about Paul... There was also a lot I wanted to ask him—about this village, for example, and what he was up to. Actually, I didn’t need to ask about the village. Ruijerd had found what he’d been seeking all that time. He’d found it at last.

“Ruijerd...” I was tearing up. My memories of our time together were coming back to me. When we first met, he’d been alone. He hadn’t looked it, first with the Migurd and then traveling with us, but he’d been alone all the same.

Not anymore, though.

“Congratulations. You found the Superd.”

“I did,” Ruijerd agreed, his eyes crinkling into a smile. Here, he was surrounded by people like him. Well, not *exactly* like him—the other four here were a bit grim—but Ruijerd looked happy among them.



“But Rudeus,” he went on, “why are you here?”

Oops, that’s right. I ’hadn’t come here for a teary reunion. I couldn’t sit around reminiscing about old times.

I sat down facing Ruijerd and arranged my face into a serious expression. “It’s a long story, and there’s a lot I want to ask you. Do you have time?”

Ruijerd paused, then said, “Chief?”

At the very back of the hall sat a man dressed more luxuriously than the other four. The chief, no doubt. He looked troubled by Ruijerd’s question.

“Is this human trustworthy?” he asked.

“He is,” Ruijerd replied.

“Then it goes without saying.”

The chief gave his permission, and Ruijerd and I began sharing what we knew.

Before I told my story, Ruijerd told me how he’d come to the village. It happened after he delivered Norn and Aisha to me, when he set off on a journey to find the surviving Superd. He planned to go from country to country and search the north of the Central Continent. No sooner had he left the village, however, than Badigadi caught up with him.

“He said that he knew where to find the surviving Superd,” Ruijerd explained.

Though Ruijerd was dubious, he didn’t have any other leads. He decided to follow Badigadi. The two of them journeyed together for years until they arrived in the Biheiril Kingdom. Then, Badigadi took him to the Superd who lived in the Forest of No Return, out beyond the Earthwyrms Ravine. The Superd Tribe welcomed him warmly. After the war, they had a lot to discuss and apologize for, but even then, they were welcoming. Ruijerd began his life in the village and found a measure of peace there.

“But now a plague has come,” he said.

It was a plague of mysterious origin. The early symptoms resembled a cold, but as time went on the afflicted grew weak, suffered unexplained tremors, and their third eye's vision grew cloudy. It ended with death. Healing magic had no effect.

Ruijerd, seeing one villager after another struck down by the plague, went out to search for a cure. Ruijerd himself had contracted the disease, but for the sake of the village, he dragged his trembling body to the Second City of Ireilil.

Luck was with him, and he found a traveling merchant who sold him medicine. Now, the village was on the road to recovery.

“But there's a rumor going around outside the forest,” I interjected. “They're saying that the group sent to investigate the devils in the forest were all killed.”

“I expect that the monsters made it out of the forest while we had the plague.”

Why had the Superd built their village in a place like this? For more or less the same reason as in the story the old woman told us back in the Earthwyrms Ravine Village.

This was hundreds of years ago. After being driven out of the Demon Continent, the Superd wandered from place to place throughout the world only to find persecution wherever they went. Sometimes knights and soldiers pursued them. The Superd refugees avoided open lands, instead traveling through forests and the foothills of mountains, searching for their promised land.

They traveled on and on, seeking a land where humans feared to tread, where they could live their lives in peace. At last, they found this place: the Forest of No Return, beyond the Earthwyrms Ravine.

Thanks to the Earth Dragons, large monsters didn't come near. All that lived in the forest were the invisible monsters. Of course, Invisible Wolves were easily as strong as your standard monster. Their invisibility was an incredible advantage; three of them could easily wipe out an adventuring party.

But the Superd, with their third eyes, had no trouble seeing the invisible monsters. While Invisible Wolves were tough, they were no match

for the Superd, who had lived on the Demon Continent. Compared to the monsters there, these wolves were practically tame. And so, the Superd settled in the Forest of No Return.

They ran into problems, as was to be expected. There were humans nearby, and just because humans didn't usually go into the forest, that didn't mean *never*. Not long after the Superd began living in the forest, a human village sprang up nearby. The villagers began to frequent the forest and occasionally came dangerously close to the Superd's home. The Superd chief drew up an agreement that they would bring down the number of monsters in the forest and keep them from going near the village, and that they would protect any villagers who became lost in the forest.

In the villagers' story, *they'd* been here first, but that was a minor inaccuracy. This was two or three hundred years ago, so the villagers' version had to be wrong. The Superd who'd made the agreement was still alive. The Superd kept a safe distance from the village, and they all got along fine...until the upheaval caused by the plague upset the balance.

"The kingdom is going to destroy this village," I told Ruijerd. I told him about the rumors circulating in the Biheiril Kingdom and what the king was going to do.

"That's what they have planned, is it...?" The chief and the others reacted to my news with despair. There was no resolve to stand against the invaders coming to destroy them, only miserable resignation. Their heads drooped. They looked defeated.

"Then we won't be able to live here any longer..."

"Is there no place for us?"

"If it weren't for that terrible war..."

Ruijerd looked at their mournful faces with remorse in his eyes, as though he'd failed them.

"I'm sorry," he said, but the others quickly shook their heads.

"We don't blame you, Ruijerd. We too supported Laplace."

"I have been bitter at times, but in those days, we were all so proud of you—the warriors we sent into battle. We are equally guilty."

"But why are we the only ones who must suffer so?"

“What made Laplace do such a thing to the Superd?”

I could hear the anguish in the chief’s voice, but no hint of blame nor regret. It was simply the voice of a man who’d despaired of his fate. His voice and body language told me he saw no way out other than to flee. The war had ended four hundred years ago. For humans, it was ancient history. But just as the displacement incident had followed me all these years, the Laplace War was still ongoing for the Superd—a nightmare that refused to end.

Without thinking, I blurted out, “If you like, I could negotiate with the Biheiril Kingdom.”

“What?”

“I’m a human, and I have a fair bit of political influence,” I explained. “All this time, the Superd have hunted the dangerous monsters within the forest to protect a human village. The Biheiril Kingdom has benefited from that. If I lay it all out clearly, I think I can at least convince them to leave you a corner of the forest to live in.”

I didn’t know what the right thing to do was. My mission was to take down Geese. Sure, making Ruijerd my ally was part of the plan, but after going to all this trouble to avoid Geese’s notice, could I justify an unnecessary course of action that might get me caught? But if I didn’t do it, I may as well leave the Superd Tribe to be slaughtered. What were all the Ruijerd figurines and picture books I’d sold for? I did all that because I wanted to help restore the Superd’s honor—to save Ruijerd.

Of course, it was possible I was getting my priorities mixed up. Maybe the timing was wrong. But who was going to save the Superd from their plight if not me?

“The humans hate us. They’ll never accept it.”

“The hatred humans have for the Superd is weakening. In the Biheiril Kingdom, they’ve even accepted ogres who don’t look human at all. I don’t think the kingdom will be too resistant to the idea. The Millis Church doesn’t hold much sway in these parts. If I have my allies spread positive stories about the Superd throughout the land while working with you, I think the people will accept it.” I said all this very quickly.

At the very least, the Biheiril Kingdom had no reason to wipe out the Superd. Without them, the Invisible Wolves would spill out of the forest and destroy the human village. I didn't know how far Invisible Wolves roamed, but attacks might even threaten the Second City of Irelil. They could claim ignorance about the Superd if necessary. That would be more beneficial than killing them all.

"And if things don't work out with the Biheiril Kingdom, you can always move to my friend's country."

The Asura Kingdom would be a tough sell. At the end of the day, the Millis Church was too big there. But there was a vast forest on Asura's northern border that didn't belong to any nation.

If they weren't *technically* within the borders and didn't do any harm, the Asuran branch of the Millis Church couldn't complain. Besides, Ariel had connections with an outlaw band in the northern forest. Maybe they could come to a friendly roommate-like arrangement. Although then Ariel might try and use them for her own purposes...

"You're sure about all this?"

"Can we even trust this man?"

"Any friend of Ruijerd's..."

"But what he's saying is unbelievable."

The others seated around the chief talked amongst themselves. They were so talkative it was hard to believe they were the same race as Ruijerd. The Superd all looked so young, it felt like watching a house owner's association meeting in a trendy neighborhood of college grads. If only I could take a video of this scene and disseminate it throughout human society, then they'd at least see that the Superd weren't devils...

"We can't make a decision right away," said the chief when the discussion ended. That was fair. If a strange man showed up out of nowhere and said what I'd said, I could see how you'd be too confused to reply.

"I understand," I said. "The humans will attack sixteen, maybe seventeen days from now. Right now, there's still time to reason with them. Please don't take too long."

If the negotiations broke down, I'd just defend the Superd village myself.

"Very well. We'll have an answer for you in a few days," the chief said. He and the others stood up to leave, their expressions dark.

"Huh? Wait, I still haven't gotten to why I'm here," I said quickly.

"You have already given us many troubling points to consider. Besides, the sun will set soon. We shall end the meeting here. I wish to collect my thoughts."

Leaving on time. What an upstanding workplace.

"See to it that your guests get food and beds," the chief said to Ruijerd.

"I will."

It wasn't the end of the world. What I'd come to say could wait until tomorrow, and anyway, I couldn't fight Geese and the Man-God unless I solved this problem with the village. One step at a time. Tomorrow, when we got to the reason behind my proposal, I'd go back and explain.

With that, my meeting with the chief was over.

We were given an empty house to stay in for the night. Dohga shut himself up inside while Chandle, fascinated, went off to observe the village at dusk.

I went to Ruijerd's house. He served as a kind of advisor in the village, and he lived in a house right at the back.

A house. Ruijerd's house. Just looking at it, I felt something warm growing in my chest. He'd suffered persecution and pressed on with no end in sight, but now those days were over. He had a home here. Even if he went away for a time, he could come back here to a warm bed and a smiling family.

It's a wonderful thing, having a home... Crap, I'm gonna start crying again.

"You sit there," Ruijerd told me once we were inside.

"Okay!"

His house was simple. The layout reminded me of Migurd houses. There was a sort of sunken hearth in the center of the room, animal skins spread on the floor, and clothing and other bits and pieces hanging on the walls. It was divided into three portions. Ruijerd went into what looked like a storage room and I heard liquid sloshing around. He probably kept stores of food and water in there.

What could the last one be? I wondered. A bedroom?

It really was bare-bones. There might be animal skins piled on the floor, but the walls were bare wood. He could at least have put an Invisible Wolf on the wall as a trophy...

My eye caught the Roxy pendant I'd given him hanging on the wall. He'd kept it all this time.

I couldn't help but notice how big the place was.

"Um, Ruijerd?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you live here by yourself?"

"I do."

Alone, in this big house. I tried to imagine living alone in my own house. I'd sleep in the same room I did now. I'd chuck stuff I didn't need in the basement like I did now. I'd use the kitchen, the dining room, and the bath—but I probably wouldn't use the living room. I doubt I'd use the other rooms either. Right now, each room in our home had a person who arranged it as they liked. All those rooms, empty. There was a time when I wouldn't have cared. Now the idea was unbearable.

"You don't want to get married or something?"

"You think I could marry?"

Oh, crap. That's right, after what Ruijerd did to his wife and child... Probably not.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize. I'm not still dwelling on the distant past. I don't have a partner, that's all." Ruijerd smiled. He sat down in front of me, as relaxed as if he were greeting family. "What have *you* been doing?"

If I'd known I'd end up here, I'd have brought Eris... No, that could wait until after this was all over. If we survived, we could come see Ruijerd any time. And everyone was working right now to make sure we all survived.

"It's a long story. Is that all right?" I asked. I was going to wait until tomorrow, but there was no harm in filling Ruijerd in first. I was dying to tell him everything.

"Tell me," he said.

"Okay." I told him everything that had happened since we parted ways. About Paul's death, my marriage to Roxy, and how I'd reunited with Eris and married her, too. Ruijerd listened amicably. His face darkened slightly at Paul's death, but, maybe because I wasn't particularly upset, he didn't ask about it. Instead, he asked after Eris.

"Did Eris catch the warrior bug in the end?"

"...Um, I think so, yeah."

"Taking three wives, though. That's just like you. Do you have children already?"

"Yes, four."

"Is that right?" He didn't say he wanted to meet them. Still, I'd bring them next time. I especially wanted to bring Arus. I wanted Ruijerd to meet the child I'd had with Eris. After I took down Geese, of course.

"Ruijerd," I said, sitting up straight. I'd mixed the order up, but now it was time for what I really wanted to talk about.

"I'm now a follower of the Dragon God Orsted," I said. I explained where things stood now. I told him how, long ago, the Dragon God Orsted and the Man-God had been enemies; I told him how at first I'd taken the Man-God's side, but he'd been deceiving me the whole time. The Man-God had seen my children as hindrances and tried to murder my family, but a version of me from the future came and stopped him in the nick of time. The Man-God, angry, proposed to me that we fight Orsted then. I went along with it. Orsted defeated me, but he turned out to be not such a bad guy, and I managed to escape from the Man-God's clutches. Since then, I'd been fighting against the Man-God as Orsted's follower.

Right now, we were in the middle of gathering allies to defeat the Demon God Laplace when he would be resurrected eighty years from now. Preparation for the battle was going well, but then Geese defected to the Man-God's side. Then came Geese's letter and the leak that informed us he was here in the Biheiril Kingdom. We'd sent trusted allies out through the whole of the kingdom to stop him.

"Ruijerd, I've been searching for you ever since I knew I'd have to fight Laplace in the future." I bowed, then made my request. "I hope you'll help... No, I want you to fight him with me."

Ruijerd bore a grudge against Laplace as well. As such, when I'd imagined this scene, he'd readily agreed.

"..."

But he didn't answer, and the silence lengthened further. He turned away from me, looking pained.

"Huh?" I said. I hadn't even considered that he might say no. I thought if I said Laplace's name, Ruijerd would look at me, expressionless as always, and say "I'll be there," as though he'd known this day would come.

But that wasn't what happened. Ruijerd had turned away from me. It was a gesture of refusal. His body language was telling me *N.O.* in capital letters.

One voice inside me was exclaiming *Are you serious?* but at the same time, another said *Yeah, fair enough.*

Think about it. He'd found the Superd. His people. He would still bear a grudge against Laplace. He'd still be angry. But his battle was over. It had ended when he fought in the final, decisive bout of the Laplace War and took his revenge.

Besides that, the Superd village was in peril. He couldn't make any hasty promises, not until that was resolved.

"Is it the Superd village? If so, you can leave that to me. In the years since I saw you last, I've made a lot of connections. I can make people see things my way now."

"That's not it."

Apparently, I was wrong. But I couldn't bring myself to give up. I wanted an answer now, so I searched for something I could use to persuade him. What had his life been after Laplace's defeat? What did he want, and what was he trying to reach? Was it to protect the Superd? To keep his people safe after he'd spent so long searching for them? I assumed so. But there was one more big thing.

"Then...is it about restoring the Superd's honor? The Kingdom of Asura and the Blessed Child of Millis are both fighting against Laplace. If you fought alongside them, that fact would go a long way to restoring your —"

"That's not it." I'd been convinced I was right, but Ruijerd shut me down.

"Then what?" Without a word, Ruijerd stood up. There was something like *hostility* in his eyes, but it was mixed with confusion and indecision.

Perhaps there was some other reason that I didn't know about.

"Rudeus, come with me," he said, then took the spear leaning against the wall and headed for the front door. I jumped to my feet and hurried after him. We'd talked for so long that it was now pitch dark outside. The moon was just visible through the gaps in the trees, but I couldn't even see my own feet.

Ruijerd left the village. I pulled out a Lamplight Spirit scroll to illuminate my surroundings. Ruijerd walked ahead in the dark as if to say he had no need for light. We reached a clearing in the forest, and he stopped.

"Rudeus."

"Yes?" He was about to tell me something I didn't want to hear. Unpleasant possibilities filled my mind.

"Back at the meeting, I told a lie," he said. I didn't say anything. "The Elders believe that lie to be true."

A lie.

"The plague wasn't cured. The medicine didn't work. We aren't on the road to any kind of recovery." I remembered the woman I'd seen

coughing in the village, the atmosphere of sickness that had filled the village, and what Chandle had said about how few people there were. “Right now,” Ruijerd went on, “all we’re doing is slowing its progression.”

“How?” I said at last. Ruijerd reached up to touch his forehead guard.

“With this.” Underneath the band, I saw a red—no, the jewel wasn’t red. It was blue. The jewel on his forehead that should have been red had changed to a bright blue. It was surrounded by black markings. The sort of thing a fourteen-year-old kid might scrawl on their left hand.

“What...is that?”

I picked up on the look on Ruijerd’s face and the disturbing aura coming off the markings, so I couldn’t bring myself to joke.

Maybe it’s because I’m stronger than I used to be—I feel like I’m more attuned to how strong and how dangerous other people are...

“I am possessed by Abyssal King Vita,” he said.

Abyssal King Vita: a resident of “Hell,” a labyrinth on the Divine Continent. A potential disciple of the Man-God.

“Abyssal King Vita split his body amongst the infected in the village. His offshoots are holding back the progress of the plague.”

“If you’re...*possessed*...are you all right?”

“I’ve had no abnormalities. The progress of the disease has slowed, and the symptoms have eased. That’s all.”

“He hasn’t, for example, said anything to you?”

“No.”

All I’d heard about Vita from Orsted was the name. I didn’t know what he looked like or what convictions he held. It turned out he possessed people, which meant he was a life form that could divide itself. Some kind of bacterium, I guess?

“But Abyssal King Vita is supposed to be in the labyrinth in Hell, on the Divine Continent... How?”

“When things were dire for the village, a man came to me with a bottle. Vita was in the bottle.”

“That man... It wasn’t...him, was it?”

“It was Geese.”

No...

“Geese said there would be a great battle in this country, and that he wanted me to help him when it happened. I said I would. I was reluctant to rely on a shadowy entity like Abyssal King Vita, but I was out of options. And the disease’s progress really slowed. Everyone was saved.” Ruijerd smiled ruefully. “Only, I never imagined Geese’s enemy in that battle would be you...”

My heart was pounding. I *had* briefly considered that Ruijerd might have turned against me. Now that it was happening, my pulse wouldn’t stop racing.

“The plague wasn’t totally cured. I was told that if Abyssal King Vita dies, his offshoots die as well. If that happens, the village will be consumed by sickness again.”

I didn’t say anything. “I have to fight you,” Ruijerd said with the same earnest expression he always wore. “Not because I want to, of course. Without you, I never would have made it here. I’d still be wandering the Demon Continent with a head full of foolish ideas.”

“I owe you so much, Ruijerd. I don’t want to fight you.”

“We must. It’s a tale that’s repeated since time began.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Two people indebted to one another become enemies. It tortures them, but they fight until one dies, and the survivor is left with a gaping hole in their heart. The same story probably recurs every time there’s a war.

But surely *this time* was different. Surely *this time* there was something I could do. We were the exception—that was it, we had to be the exception. There was a way to avoid fighting. If our reason to fight went away, for example. I just had to eliminate it. If only I knew what it was.

Orsted and the Man-God were one reason, but I couldn’t betray Orsted at this point. This was about Ruijerd and me. The reason Ruijerd had to fight me: his people, his fellow Superd. If there were no more Superd—no, that was monstrous. Then it clicked. It was the plague. The plague that

was devouring the Superd. If I worked out how to cure it, I'd get all the Superd on my side.

"If I found a way to fully cure the plague, would you betray them and join me?"

Ruijerd's face darkened slightly at the word "betray." His gaze was intense, but I didn't look away. Geese might have called first dibs on Ruijerd, but Ruijerd had told me about it. If he were fully on Geese's side, he could have just killed me without saying anything. Ruijerd was unsure. That was why he'd brought me here.

Ruijerd's mouth twisted and his brow furrowed. I thought of myself as his friend, and I was sure he thought the same way about me. But he also felt obligated to Geese—and by extension the Man-God, who gave Geese his orders—for saving his people. Ruijerd was a man of conscience, after all.

"I told you that the Man-God betrayed me," I said. "There's no way to guarantee he won't do the same to the Superd. Even Geese was betrayed. The Man-God killed all his people. Geese followed him after that. It's possible that, once the battle is over, Abyssal King Vita will just pick up and leave, and the Superd will die out anyway."

Even if *you* felt a debt to the Man-God, chances were high he'd ultimately betray you anyway. The Man-God was an asshole like that. Coming from me, it was just enemy speculation, but I couldn't leave Ruijerd in the dark about what he'd signed up for.

He didn't say anything, just looked at me in silence. We gazed at each other for a while, until at last Ruijerd spoke.

"If such a cure really exists, then yes. I want to fight at your side too."

"Ruijerd...!" I cried, a sigh of relief bursting out of me.

Thank god. This isn't going to turn into us killing each other.

"But *is* there such a cure?"

"Orsted knows all sorts of things about the world. If I ask him, he might know something."

But would Orsted tell me? He hadn't told me before this. He hadn't even told me that the Superd were here.

I'd ask him properly about all of it. I could worry about whether to fight Ruijerd after that.

"Look, I'm sure there's a way to counter it. Please, give me some time before you start calling me your enemy."

I was putting the problem off. That wasn't a good move. There'd still be time for us to be enemies later, if it turned out there was nothing to be done.

"Orsted came here once, before Geese."

"What?" The sudden revelation threw me. *Orsted was here? When?*

"Around two years ago, when people were first getting sick. He did nothing. We didn't know of his connection to you, of course, so we drove him away... If what you've said is true, you and he were already allies then."

What the hell? What the hell?

"Are you really sure you can trust him?"

Orsted hadn't told me about the Superd. Until now, there'd been a slim chance he hadn't known, but that was gone. Trust... A cure... Impossible. I didn't know what to do.

Even so, I replied, "I am."

Orsted had always been good to me. Maybe he had a good reason here, too. The Superd might get in his way in the future, for example. We could clear everything up if I just talked to him about it. Orsted had come to the village, but he hadn't killed them all. Maybe he'd come here meaning to do so, but hadn't followed through on it. I had a theory about that.

"I am sure I can trust Orsted," I said. I'd stuck with Orsted up until now. I didn't doubt that at all. It was true he sometimes didn't tell me things and failed to get in touch as much as he should, but when it came to our goal of taking down the Man-God, I could trust him.

"I don't really like putting it like this, but you don't have to trust Orsted. Trust me. I'd never do anything to hurt the Superd."

Ruijerd turned away from me. He folded his arms, thinking. Then he looked up at the sky, as though struck by some idea. The moon hung huge above us.

“...Ngh!” Ruijerd suddenly clutched at his chest and crouched down.

“Ruijerd?!” I ran over to him, frantic. Next moment, his head snapped up and he grabbed my shoulder.

Something was wrong. Something had changed in Ruijerd’s face. His eyes were completely blue. The whites, the irises, and the pupils had all turned a deep blue. His mouth hung half open. He looked incoherent. The gem on his forehead had regained its red coloration, but the markings around it emitted a disturbing glow. When I saw that, it clicked.

“You’re being controlled?!”

Shit. He’d *clearly* told me he was possessed. Just because he said nothing had happened up until now, that didn’t mean I should have jumped into this conversation.

By the time I realized that, it was already too late. Ruijerd’s face drew close to mine and he kissed me. Liquid flowed into my mouth and then, squirming like a living creature, it slithered down my throat.

Chapter 5: Abyssal King Vita

“**A**AAGH...!” I leapt up, panting and looking around me. I saw a campfire and an unfamiliar forest illuminated by the firelight. The moon and stars shone in the sky; insects chirped in the distance. My heart pounded. My arms felt heavy and numb, like I’d been clenching my fists or my circulation had been cut off while I slept. My mouth was so dry that my tongue stuck to the inside of my mouth. It felt disgusting.

“What’s wrong?” came a voice. I craned my neck around and saw a woman. She was on one knee beside me, looking at me with a concerned expression. She had smooth blonde hair and confident eyes—not a bombshell, but slim and good-looking.

“...Sara.”

“You jumped up all of a sudden. Bad dream?”

“A bad dream...? Oh, yeah. Maybe.”

I did feel like I’d had a weird dream. But I couldn’t remember what the nightmare had been about. I felt sure it must have been a nightmare... but then it slipped away from me. Dreams are like that.

“Keep it together, okay? We’re going into the labyrinth tomorrow. No one’s going to think it’s funny if you flub the real thing because you’re sleep-deprived.”

“I know that.”

“Not that I can even imagine you screwing up bad enough to get a party member killed or anything,” Sara said, laughing. She sat down next to me, bumping shoulders with me. I put my arm around her, then she rested her head on my shoulder. She smelled nice.

“We’ll be retiring too when this is over, huh?”

“Yeah.” Sara and I weren’t just adventurers in a party together. We were lovers and engaged.

This labyrinth exploration was going to be our last—we were planning to retire as adventurers and get married. How did I end up with her? It's not that long a story. It happened back when I was around thirteen years old... A lot had happened. I'd given up on my life, and I was just managing to drag myself on. My spirit was at rock-bottom. I was a shell of myself as I searched for Zenith.

That's where I was when I joined the party Counter Arrow. At first, I thought I'd had more than enough of being in a party and was cold to Sara and the others. But they all treated me with kindness, especially Timothy, their leader, and their second-in-command, Suzanne. We ended up working together in the same town for a while. Sara was the only one who was standoffish to me until one incident triggered a sudden change.

Long story short, I saved her life and she fell for me. Sara was an assertive woman, very standoffish on the surface, but she didn't really try to hide her affection. She moved fast, so our relationship heated up fast as well. When I spent a night with Sara, I still didn't think I liked her that much. I'd noticed her, but I kept my distance from her. I think it was because I'd been a virgin in my past life. Perhaps that was why we fell in love so naturally. The natural friction of her pushing and me pulling away...

We crossed that first line early, but after that, as I got to know her better and better, my feelings for her developed unrushed.

That's why it lasted so long. The two of us carried on adventuring in the grip of new love. Elinalise was the reason why things changed. She gave me the news that Zenith was alive, and that Paul, Talhand, and Geese were working on rescuing her.

I immediately decided to go support Paul. Sara and I left Counter Arrow and headed for the Begaritt Continent. The rescue mission was an unmitigated success, and then we went home.

Then Zenith told me, "I want you to live for yourself," and so Sara and I went on adventuring. We'd now cleared five highly challenging labyrinths as an S-rank adventurer party. The whole world knew about us.

"Hey, Rudeus?" Sara called.

"Hm?"

She chuckled. "Nothing," she said.

I loved her smile and impulsively reached for her butt. Sara went along with my mischief without resistance. In the past, she would've glared at me, but now it was just part of our standard physical affection. We gazed into each other's eyes, our hands on each other's bodies. Something suddenly flitted across her face. Sara looked uneasy.

"Once we quit being adventurers, do you think we'll make it?" she asked.

"You're bringing that up now? Cold feet?"

"We're getting married and settling down—that means becoming a mother too, right? Cooking, cleaning, and washing...and raising a child... I don't know if I can do it."

"That's fine. I'll do it, then. You can keep doing what you're good at."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

Sara was still nervous about starting a family. She'd always been an adventurer; she didn't know any other way of life. Her worries about how she'd handle suddenly becoming a wife and a mother and being made to do housework came up over and over. It wasn't that I didn't understand how she felt, but I'd been reincarnated—I had memories of my previous life. When I'd died, Japan's cultural expectations had started to shift toward expecting men and women to both take an active role in childcare. I didn't feel any need to get hung up on Sara doing all the housework. We could even set it up so that she'd work and I'd be a stay-at-home husband. Even when I told Sara that, she didn't seem convinced.

"There's no point worrying about the future. We've just got to give it our all in each moment."

"You say that, but all you're interested in is the night after the wedding."

"Hey, that's not true."

"Liar. My eyes are up here, by the way," Sara said, then giggled. She was teasing, but her tone was soft.

Okay, if I were being honest, I did have some expectations for married life, just the two of us, in love, in a house where no one would bother us... Once we were husband and wife, it wouldn't matter if she got pregnant. All restrictions were off the table. We'd be working hard to make a son for me and a grandchild for Paul.

As I tried to work out how to answer, Sara leaned in to whisper in my ear. "But I want three kids." She then went bright red and looked away. I think she'd embarrassed herself a little. For her, it was a bold invitation. "Um, anyway! I'm going to bed. You take watch!"

"Roger that. Good night."

"Good night!" She punched me lightly on the shoulder, then went back to her own sleeping bag. Conscious that I was smiling, I threw another log on the dwindling campfire...then, with a start, I realized that another party member who should have been asleep was watching me from where he lay.

"Hey," he said, sitting up slowly. His long, light-colored hair was tied back at his neck. He gave me a languorous wave. Paul.

Say what? What's Paul doing here? He should be dead...

No, he wasn't dead. I couldn't kill him off *that* easily. After rescuing Zenith from the teleportation labyrinth, he'd moved to the Asura Kingdom with her, and they were working hard to rebuild Fittoa. They'd cheerfully sent me off when I decided to become an adventurer. However, when this labyrinth exploration mission came up, Paul had butted in, saying, "You kids alone? I'd be worried sick."

Yeah, that was how it went. Definitely.

"Dad, it's gross to snoop on people."

"Snoop? What's that sleepy brain of yours talking about?"

"Oh, come on..."

"Anyway, you two have a nice thing going. You gonna marry her?"

"That's the plan. Dad, you were there when I introduced her, weren't you?"

“Nope, I wasn’t.” He’d definitely been there. That was weird. Maybe I was still half-asleep.

“More importantly,” he went on, “aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What something?”

“Why did you give up on yourself before you met Sara?”

“Why? Well, that’s...” *Wait, why was it again?*

That’s right, Ruijerd had seen me as far as Fittoa, then I’d woken up and there’d been no one there... Huh? But Ruijerd—

Paul scoffed. “You can’t even remember a simple thing like that? And you say you’re getting married.”

Paul’s teasing was starting to tick me off, so I stood up and walked over to him. “What’s your problem here? Did you tag along just to say that?”

“Hey, I’m not saying it ’cause I enjoy this.”

“Then *what*—?” I began, grabbing Paul by the chest of his shirt. But then I saw it.



“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked.

Paul’s lower half was missing.

“Aaagh...!” I leapt up. As my eyes flew open, they were met with the sight of an unfamiliar room. I saw a soft blanket covering my own legs, then the door to the bedroom and a half-open window that let in a gentle breeze. Behind me, there was a Treant seed pillow and a crafted figurine on the bedside table.

This was a familiar bed. I was in my house in the Magic City of Sharia. I was panting. I had the feeling I’d had a strange dream.

“What was it...?” I couldn’t remember what the dream had been about. Only it must have been a nightmare, or I wouldn’t have leapt up like this. Dreams are like that.

“Mmm...mm!” I got out of bed and stretched. It was a beautiful day again today. Soon summer would end and give way to fall. I couldn’t wait.

As I bounded down the stairs, two children came charging up past me. They had dark brown hair and beast ears.

“Watch out or you’ll fall,” I called after them.

“Okaaay.” They ran into their room and I continued down to the first floor. I went down the corridor into the dining room. A woman was there, getting breakfast ready. Her voluptuous curves were packed into her plain clothes, but they couldn’t contain her. Her butt peeked out of the bottom of her skirt along with a tail. As I walked into the room, her pointed ears twitched and she turned around.

“Morning, Linia,” I said.

“Good mornin’,” Linia said. She sounded a little curt. I felt a pang of that vague unease you get after an unpleasant dream. I went and put my arms around her.

“Oh, Linia,” I said.

“Mew?!”

Linia was my wife. How had we ended up married again? That’s right, thinking back, it was when we were students. I was worrying about my ED and trying everything to treat my little guy. That’s when I’d met Linia and Pursena. They were young and fresh and full of wild energy. We tussled, then I tied them up and peeled their clothes off, but even then, my ED persisted.

A year went by, and another, and with every encounter in class and in the cafeteria, we noticed each other a little more. Eventually, the two of them became more overtly alluring. My little guy began, slowly but surely, to respond.

It was the fall of their seventh year at the university when I recovered fully. The two of them were in heat and they’d come charging into my room, unable to restrain themselves. That took me back. What a night.

On graduation day, Linia and Pursena fought and Pursena won. Pursena returned to the great forest, and Linia came to live with me. Since then, we’d made a baby every autumn.

“*Hissss!*”

“Ow!” After putting my arms around Linia, I’d started squeezing her boobs, but she grabbed my hand.

“Only when I’m in heat! That’s the rule, don’t you fur-get it!”

“Come on, it’s just a hug...”

“It won’t stop with just a hug, not with you. A wife isn’t her husband’s sex slave, mew!”

“I’m not trying to make you one...” I sighed and sat down at the table. Linia was always like this. According to some beastfolk rule, I was only allowed to do her while she was in heat. When that happened, she came straight to me. When Linia was in heat, her baby-making urges were more than enough to satisfy my sex drive. And those babies? Super cute.

That wasn’t the problem. A little more touching didn’t seem like it’d hurt, just to show we...loved each other?

“Breakfast’s ready, mew!” Linia called, beating an empty pot.

“Okaaaay!” The kids came dashing down from upstairs. Not just the two from earlier—there were twelve of them. Beastfolk had two or three children with every pregnancy, so we were packed to the rafters. Almost every room in the house had a kid in it now.

“Eat up and get to work, mew! Your pupils are waiting, mew!” Linia badgered me.

“Okay, okay.” I started eating my breakfast. She was a great cook. When we first got married, all she could do was grill meat, simmer fish, and boil vegetables, but over the past few years she’d learned all sorts of Sharian dishes. The flavor was a little bland, but she was a different race with different taste buds. Couldn’t be helped.

“Thank you,” I said when I was finished.

“You’re welcome.”

I changed into my robes and headed to work. I’d joined the Magicians’ Guild just after graduation and was now a teacher at the University of Magic. I taught classes on non-vocalized magic. It was an extremely practical style, so my course was very popular. If I established that my teaching method for non-vocal magic and my students did well, I might be looking at vice-principal or even principal down the line.

“I’m off,” I said.

“Have a nice day at work, mew.” With that, I headed for the front door. Another day, working hard for my wife and kids!

“Huh?” The door to the living room was ajar. I sensed someone inside. Someone I knew so well it hurt. I opened the door as though someone had called me and saw a man. He was sitting on the sofa facing away from me with one arm draped over the back of the sofa. His light brown hair was tied back at his neck.

“Huh?”

He turned around. “Hey.” It was Paul. What was he doing here? Wasn’t he dead? Then I remembered: he wasn’t dead. He’d given up on the teleportation labyrinth and come back home. Then we’d come to the Magic City of Sharia, where he lived nearby.

Yeah, that was how it went. Lilia and Norn were living at Paul's house now too. Paul had blamed me for not going to save him, but we got along well now.

That was how the story went. Definitely.

"You have a lovely wife."

"A lovely wife?" I echoed. "It's not like this is the first time you've seen her."

"Nope, first time," Paul said, smiling broadly and shaking his head. "Are you happy like this?"

"What? What're you trying to say?"

"Nothing in particular. Just asking if you feel like anything's missing."

"Nothing is missing." Linia was a good wife. Sure, the fact that she only let me touch her within a set period of time every year wasn't ideal... but it wasn't anything bad enough to complain about. She'd be in heat any day now, and then we'd be all over each other. She'd give me more loving than my body could keep up with. Then she'd get pregnant with another two or three kids. My manly instincts were more than satisfied. There were times when I wanted more, but when you considered we were cramming it all into one spurt, that was no big deal. My job was going well too. I was a popular teacher at the university. My classes got rave reviews as amongst the best in the school. My students loved me and I was a respected colleague. I was super successful and the future was bright.

"Yeah? Nothing missing, huh? Well, that's a relief."

"It is."

"But aren't you forgetting something?" Paul asked. His voice was gentle like he was chiding a stupid child, but it sounded like an accusation. "What about that job of yours, for example? Who'd you imitate to get all those students and teachers to like you?"

"Well, that's..." *Who was it again?*

I thought I saw something blue shoot in front of me and shook my head to clear it. But the discord in my mind only intensified.

“Someone taught you, right?” he pressed me. “About how to succeed in the world.”

“What’s your problem?! Just say what you want to say!” Letting my anger take hold of me, I headed over to the sofa. I went around it to face Paul, seizing the front of his shirt. Then...I froze.

“All right, I’ll say it,” Paul said.

“I’m already dead.”

Paul’s lower half was missing.

“Aaagh...!” I leapt out of bed, panting. My throat was dry, and my back was soaked with sweat. What a horrible dream. I’d had an unbelievable dream. What was that... What *was* that...?

“That was one hell of a nightmare...” I muttered.

“Is something wrong?”

“I just had a strange dream. Back when we were at the Magic University...Linia, that beastfolk woman, was there, right? In my dream, we were married and even had kids. I was a lecturer teaching kids non-vocalized magic.”

“That’s a nightmare?”

Was it a nightmare? Now that she said it, maybe it hadn’t been a nightmare. Linia and I spent a short period each year engaged in passionate baby-making, then the rest of the time I looked after the children while teaching magic to my pupils. It was a modest life, but a good one.

And yet—

“Yeah, it is,” I said, watching my wife climb down from our canopy bed with sleepy eyes.

She was a goddess of beauty. She was the perfect height, not too tall or too short. Her breasts were the perfect size, not too big or too small. Her butt was on the small side, but it went perfectly with her height and breasts. She was slim overall, neither scrawny nor flabby. The effect wasn't average, it was extraordinary. Her body was the definition of "well proportioned." The only thing out of place at the moment was her bedhead. Her blonde hair, usually flowing and beautiful, was a bit of a mess. It did nothing to diminish her charms. Her unruly hair gave her the allure of a grown woman. In a word, she was *sexy*. Knowing her hair was like that because of what we'd done last night made it thirty percent sexier.

"I've married a wonderful woman and I'm in a position where I can have everything I could ever want. I couldn't bear being a teacher in a town in the middle of nowhere."

"Hehe. Are you flattering me, by any chance? Good job," said my wife, Ariel Anemoi Asura.

"Perhaps you yearn for that kind of life," she continued. "There's been a lot of urgent government business lately, hasn't there? The life of the royal family certainly isn't easy. In our jobs, even the smallest things bring with them great responsibility—but there's no guarantee that our happiness will be enough to make that responsibility worth it. One person can only experience so much happiness."

"You think so?"

"I imagine that in your country town, working as a teacher, surrounded by your children, the balance between happiness and responsibility was very different from your life as royalty... Perhaps instead of a woman like me, a girl like Linia is more to your taste."

That was ridiculous. Ariel was the ultimate woman. Flawless. She subtly corrected my faults and even deferred to me in public. She didn't mention what I did with other women and let me keep concubines. On top of that, she was good at her job. Everyone relied on her. She was the ideal leader, an idol of the people.

Except maybe she *did* have some faults. She was argumentative, and she valued logic too highly over emotion. Her kinks were a little unique, too. Last night... No, let's not get into that. That couldn't be called a fault—at least, not by me.

“I’m sorry. Did I let my mouth run away with me a little?” she asked.

“No, I was just thinking that you might actually be right.”

“Please, tell me if you need time off. The kingdom is more stable these days, so I can spare you for a short break. You could take a trip... It might be nice to take one of your concubines.”

“If I got any time off, I’d want to spend the whole day with you in my arms.”

“Oh, you...” she said. “Always joking.”

“I’m serious.”

How long was it since Ariel and I first slept together? At first, I’d taken lots of concubines and embraced debauchery, but these days, that was growing dull. She was the only one I needed. If you asked me what made me happiest in my life, it would have to be that I could do whatever I wanted in bed with Ariel Ameno Asura.

“All right, let’s set a day aside for that soon,” Ariel said, laughing lightly as her lady-in-waiting dressed her. I stood up too and spread my arms. A second lady-in-waiting immediately rushed to my side. Watching the two of them efficiently dividing up the task of dressing us, I really felt important.

I felt a pang of nostalgia for my time at the University of Magic. I’d entered the university, then I’d met Ariel. Despite coming out worse in a political struggle and being driven from her kingdom, she was undaunted and gathering allies. She scouted me, the only one at the University of Magic who could perform non-vocalized magic. Even then, she was gorgeous and charismatic. I was cold to her, partly because that was right as I was suffering from ED. It was when she cured me that things changed. Her method was a bit rough. She used an aphrodisiac to force me to get aroused and come on to her. At the time, I didn’t realize that it had all been her design. Thinking I’d done something horrifying, I became her ally out of guilt and a wish for atonement.

I was like an especially strong bodyguard. I wasn’t given any particular privileges; I was only there to protect Ariel. What began to change that was, of course, the time I spent near her. Ariel always did her best to play the part of royalty. Sometimes, though, she let me see her as the

vulnerable young woman she was. Little by little, I fell for her. I won't deny I had impure thoughts from the start, but it wasn't purely for her body—I fell for her soul too.

My fellow bodyguard Luke and I butted heads repeatedly. I think he had his own feelings for Ariel.

Luke died in the war in the Asura Kingdom, while Ariel and I survived. I confessed my feelings to Ariel at last...and got everything I wanted. I had the best woman in the world and the greatest country in the world. I became the king of the Kingdom of Asura. Rudeus Anemoi Asura, King of Asura. That was who I was.

Really, I was just an extension of Ariel—her puppet. She said she only did it this way because things ran more smoothly than they would if she took the lead as queen. I was originally from a very highly ranked bloodline in the Kingdom of Asura, so no one objected. Out in the world, they were calling me Magician King Rudeus. Maybe I could find a power-up out there somewhere and gain a few more premodifiers? Become Super Mega Magician King Rudeus?

I admit, I wasn't totally sure if Ariel loved me or not. I couldn't shake the feeling that she was just using me for my power and position. She'd only married me to facilitate the smooth governance of the nation, after all. My unease about that was part of why I'd taken such a huge number of concubines.

Recently, I'd begun to think that it didn't matter what Ariel's true feelings were. Ever since we'd gotten married, Ariel had resolutely insisted she loved me. She was a hard worker. She was making an effort. It was possible that it was fake love, but it was enough to satisfy me. Maybe I was being deceived, but what an enjoyable position to be led into!

On the other hand, if I became more of a hindrance than an asset, Ariel would likely turn on me. Whether that came to pass depended on how much effort I put in. I knew I'd better work hard.

"All right, shall we go?" Ariel said. "There's another mountain of government business to get through today."

"Yeah." Ariel and I left the bedroom together. The two knights guarding the door bowed to us. In fact, not just the guards. Everyone we

passed as we walked down the corridor stopped and bowed.

This was power. If I told one of them I didn't like how they bowed, they'd drop to their knees, white as a sheet. If I told them to lick my boots, they might do it. I wouldn't do anything like that, of course, but it felt great being in a position where I could.

The first job of the day was an issue that had come up overnight. No one had rushed to wake us, so it probably wasn't urgent. We'd take a leisurely two hours to clear it up, then meet with the head of the knight order before lunch. After we ate, we had audiences with nobles who had appointments. In the afternoon, maybe I'd go through some petitions. It'd be nice if I could make holiday plans too. I wanted to have a baby with Ariel soon, and I enjoyed my role as a stud horse.

"Your Majesty!" Just then, the knight captain came running over to us. He knelt before me, then declared, "The knight who went to slay the monsters in the Eastern Forest returned on the verge of death! Before he dies, he wishes to speak directly to you, Your Majesty!"

"What?!" Monsters in the Eastern Forest... Had that happened?

"We didn't receive that report," Ariel remarked.

Right, yeah.

"This knight is dying for the sake of Your Majesty! I beg of you, be with him for his final hours!"

"You don't need to go, dear," Ariel said, detached. It wasn't as if I had more important things to do, though.

"No, I'll go see him." The final wish of a knight who'd fought for his country. I could at least hear him out. I could remember his name.

With that thought, I hurried to the audience chamber. Ariel looked annoyed, but she smoothed it out quickly and followed after me.

Our subjects were assembled in the audience chamber. Duke Notos, Duke Boreas, Duke Euros, Duke Zepeuro, and others—the who's who, the VIPs, the all-around stars of the Asuran Nobility.

They all stood around a man waiting on a red velvet carpet. He lay on a stretcher, covered by a blanket. I knew his face.

“Huh...?” It was Paul. What was Paul doing here?

Ah, that’s right. When Paul heard I’d become king, he came straight here to pledge himself to my service. Despite not getting on with the Notos family, he even bent his knee to them. As a knight, he’d strived to protect me.

“Hey, Rudy,” he said. He raised a hand casually, as though he weren’t injured at all.

“Dad...” I said. “I heard from the captain that you drove out the monsters...”

“Monsters? What’re you talking about?”

“Huh?”

Seeing my confusion, Paul gave a patient sigh. “That’s not why I’m here,” he said.

“I’m asking you to tell me—!” I broke off with a gasp as Paul pushed the blanket off him. His legs were gone.

He spoke calmly despite the gory, fatal wound. “Let’s pick up where we left off,” he said.

“Ahhh!” I opened my eyes. I’d had a bad dream. A nightmare. It felt like I’d had nothing but nightmares these past few days.

“Love? What’s wrong?” said the woman beside me, wiping the sweat from my forehead with her hand. She had ample curves and a precocious smile. My wife, Aisha.

She and I had...um, how *did* we end up married again?

Ah, that’s right! Okay, so we were in the bath, and I couldn’t restrain myself. She was always flirting with me, and every year her body got more... But wait, what?

“Hey, what’s wrong?” she asked. “Oh, now we’re married, should I keep calling you my big brother? Too late to stop now, I guess. You are *such*

a pervert, Big Brother.”

I didn’t reply. Paul was there behind Aisha. He was sitting in a chair, and he didn’t have any legs. He watched us and shot me a flippant grin.

“It’s no good. I’ve already got you,” he whispered. “You’ve worked it out, right?”

Had I worked it out? *Oh. Okay, yeah.* I’d started to work it out. The reason behind this string of nightmares. This sense that something was wrong. I’d woken up over and over again, and every time it had been a dream.

This was also a dream.

“You finally realized? It’s all Abyssal King Vita. This farce is over.”
Abyssal King? Right. Abyssal King Vita. Now I remembered.

Suddenly, I was back in my room—my study in a large house in the Magic City of Sharia. My desk was strewn with diaries and magical treatises, and on the shelf there was a stone tablet engraved with a magic circle and a half-finished figurine.

I was standing in the middle of the room while Paul sat in the study chair. I couldn’t tell since he was sitting down, but he probably didn’t have legs.

Paul was dead, after all. The Manatite Hydra had carried off his legs in the bowels of the teleportation labyrinth on the Begaritt Continent, and he’d died. Because of my mistake.

“...Are you Abyssal King Vita?” I asked.

Paul rolled his eyes at me. “‘Course I’m not,” he said. “If I was Abyssal King Vita, you think I’d have woken you up from your dream?”

“Oh, yeah...” He had a point.

“Abyssal King Vita is backed into a corner,” he told me.

“Okay, sure, but what are you?”

“Hey now. Did you forget your old man’s face?”

“I mean, it’s been a long time since you died.”

“Sheesh, that’s cold. You’d better not have forgotten,” Paul said, then grinned. That smile was exactly like the Paul I remembered. Just looking at him, I felt a lump rise in my throat. Aw, crap, I was going to cry.

Paul’s expression immediately turned serious, and he stared at the door behind me. “I’ve chased Abyssal King Vita here. There’s something that feels wrong in this house. Find it and destroy it. That’s Vita’s core.”

“Got it!”

I didn’t know who this Paul was, but he wasn’t an enemy. At least I thought so, despite not having any basis or evidence. This might even be Abyssal King Vita’s scheme, but if it weren’t for Paul, I’d have been trapped in happy dreams forever. Resolved, I exited the study into a familiar corridor. This was my house in the Magic City of Sharia. I’d bought it when I married Sylphie. The mansion where I’d found a strange doll when I’d explored it with Zanoba and Cliff.

Then I brought my younger sisters in to live with me, married Roxy, and married Eris. My dream home, where I lived with my three wives. I knew that was real. My thoughts were still muddled, but I could hold on to those facts.

I walked down the corridor and into the living room, where Lilia was cleaning.

“Master Rudeus,” she said, wiping down a table beside the fireplace with a rag. “Is something the matter?”

“...No. I’m sorry, I’m always leaving you to do all the cleaning and things.”

Lilia stared at me in surprise for a moment, but then she smiled mischievously. “Since you mention it, Master Rudeus, you could at least tidy your study yourself. I don’t know if it’s all right for me to touch so many of the things in your room.”

“Haha, I’ll take care.” Nothing felt wrong here. Lilia sounded like herself. She wasn’t serious about struggling or wanting me to clean up.

Teasing was her way of showing affection. Even if Lilia didn't know what she was allowed to touch, Aisha did.

“By the way, where is everyone?”

“Miss Norn is at school, and Aisha is advising at the Mercenary Band.”

Nothing felt wrong there. She didn't mention my three wives because, in this world, Sylphie, Roxy and Eris didn't exist. For some reason, I felt certain that it was that sort of world. So nothing felt wrong. It was a contradiction, perhaps, but it didn't feel wrong. It wasn't Lilia I was looking for.

“Okay, thank you,” I said, then left the living room. I went to the front door, but nothing felt wrong there either. Only Roxy's coat and Eris's training sword were missing, but Roxy and Eris didn't exist. That was normal.

Hmm. Knowing what feels wrong is tricky.

It was ultimately subjective—you wouldn't just find a sense of wrongness lying around. I was looking carefully, but I wasn't very good at these spot-the-difference type things. I never knew how to answer at first when Sylphie went to the hairdresser, then came home and said “Rudy, do you notice anything different about me today?” Admittedly, Sylphie didn't say stuff like that very much.

Anyway, it looked like I might have to get stuck in and take down notes to work out my adversary's intention and what felt wrong here.

I went to the dining room. And gasped.

I'd found it. The thing that felt wrong.

“That's not fair...”

Thinking about it, all the dreams had been the manifestation of what I guess you could call fantasies of mine, wishful thoughts that had crossed my mind.

The world where I never got ED and things were going well with Sara. The world where Linia cured my ED and we got married. The world where the angelic beauty Ariel and I fell in love, then I became king. The world where things happened between me and Aisha.

That last one I'd never fantasized about explicitly, but I couldn't deny it might have held a certain subconscious appeal. She was my little sister, so I didn't really get turned on by her, but that didn't mean I didn't know she was objectively attractive. In another situation, I might have been interested.

The point was, they'd all been worlds made to suit me. Nothing had felt wrong. In each world, I hadn't even sensed anything was off until I'd been faced with an obvious contradiction.

This house was different. Paul was here from the start, and I had my memories. That was how I knew what was off the moment I saw her.

"Oh, Rudy, you're home. You're early today," said Zenith as she got food ready. Placemats were on the table for the whole family, with plates and cups set out. I didn't say anything. "What's wrong? You seem troubled... Oh! That's right. You're home early, so that's perfect. The thing is... Ta-dah!"

She looked well. She was a little older than the Zenith I remembered, but otherwise, she was the same cheerful mother I remembered from when we lived in Fittoa.



“You’re grown up, Rudy, but I haven’t heard anything about romance! So I went out and found a partner for you!” Zenith declared, showing me a painting of a woman on a board—a matchmaker photo. I knew the woman in the painting. I was pretty sure she worked at the Magicians’ Guild, the fourth daughter of a Ranoa noble family. She had more of a talent for magic than her sisters, so she’d enrolled at the University of Magic, but while she was there her family fell into ruin. Unable to go home, she’d joined the Magicians’ Guild.

“She’s in the same guild as you. When I said I was looking for a bride for you, Rudy, she seemed enthusiastic. You don’t seem like you’d be happy with a strategic marriage. Well, I thought that was a matter of taste, so I talked to her, and she didn’t seem totally opposed...”

She sounded really happy.

If Zenith hadn’t ended up like that in the Teleportation Labyrinth, if I hadn’t married Sylphie or Roxy, if I hadn’t had any other romances—I bet then Zenith would have started meddling in my love life. If I accepted, she’d be overjoyed like a schoolgirl making her dolls kiss and hurry things along. If Sylphie had lived nearby, she might have done everything she could to bring Sylphie and me together.

“What do you think, Rudy? Isn’t she pretty? Will you meet her?”

“Okay,” I said.

“That’s great. All right, I’ll talk to them first!” She sighed. “I worry about you. And Aisha is just the same! Neither of you have any instinct for this kind of thing. Norn’s the only one with any luck in this department.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“I thought, as Paul’s son, you’d be insatiable... It’s because you’re too cautious around girls!” Zenith said, then went back to setting the table.

“I’m your son too, Mom...”

I stood frozen, magic concentrated in my finger as I pointed it at Zenith. My hand was shaking and tears threatened to spill down my cheeks. I couldn’t do it. Zenith left the kitchen.

A few days passed. Paul was in the study the whole time, his legs gone. He said to me, “Have you found what’s wrong? Then hurry up and destroy it,” in a tone just like the one he’d used when he was alive. When I told him that Zenith was the source of the wrongness, he didn’t say anything else.

In this world, I was a magician who belonged to the Magicians’ Guild. The same scenario as when I was with Linia. The only difference was that Zenith had been rescued safe and sound. Paul was dead.

We’d bought the house when Norn and the others came to the Magic City. It was supposed to be a home for everyone when Paul came back. I went to work at the Magicians’ Guild, then came home at night to have dinner with my mother and sisters.

If, in my previous earthly life, I’d ever gotten out of my shut-in ways and managed to find a job, my life might have fallen into this sort of rhythm. That’s how the time I spent here made me feel.

My prospective betrothal was also progressing. Our meeting had gone off without a hitch. Maybe because we’d worked together and knew a fair bit about each other, arrangements galloped along. She’d known me since her days at the University of Magic and she’d been a little fond of me ever since.

I didn’t remember this, but apparently one time she’d been surrounded by some dodgy guys. I’d come to her rescue.

She came across as quiet and plain, but she was clever, sensible, and observant. Maybe she was a bit lacking in appeal as a potential romantic partner, but as a potential wife she was perfectly adequate. After we were first set up, we went on two dates. On the third, I proposed. She said yes. Zenith just about put on a festival when I told her. After that, our wedding preparations sailed along at a rapid clip. We were fortunate enough to have a house with plenty of unused rooms; it wasn’t a problem bringing my fiancée into the household, and so she moved in right away.

More than anything else, it was what Zenith wanted. She gushed to Lilia about how “When Rudy’s bride arrives, we’ll do this together and that together...”

The night before the wedding, Zenith and Lilia were beside themselves with excitement. Norn and Aisha joined in on the fuss for a while, but eventually got bored and went to bed. I stayed with the two of them until Lilia fell asleep. She'd had a bit much to drink. Without anyone else to gush at, Zenith kept on chipping away at the drinks, telling me about what I'd been like as a child and things like that.

Out of the blue, she said, "It feels like there's a weight off my shoulders."

"I was a burden on you?"

"No, that's not what I mean. You always looked after us after Paul died in the Teleportation Labyrinth, Rudy. I'm your mother. I shouldn't be getting looked after, I thought. I should be looking after *you*... I wished I could."

"I see."

"Rudy, once you're married, if your wife is ever in a bad mood or there are girl things you don't understand, you come and ask me," Zenith said. She stroked Lilia's hair where she slept beside her, looking a little embarrassed. "I'm sure Paul would've been able to say it better, but I'm your mother, so I know I can give you advice too."

I didn't say anything.

"Rudy, hey there, what's wrong?" I realized tears were streaming from my eyes. All the dreams Vita had shown me had been happy. This one was no different. If I hadn't *remembered*, I could have lived a happy life here.

In a world with no Eris and no Sylphie, I'd still be a virgin, so I'd marry my first girlfriend. My sisters would be grossed out and Zenith would tell me off. I'd go through ups and downs...and, little by little, I'd grow. It was entirely possible I'd screw it up spectacularly and we'd get divorced, but even so...

In this world, my family would all live a happy life, not wanting for anything. I knew that. I knew in my soul that that was how it would go. This had to be Vita's final act of resistance. He was doing this on the bet that even though I knew it was a dream, I wouldn't destroy it. And he would be certain that, so long as he took Zenith's form, I wouldn't destroy him.

This whole time, I'd been waiting and watching. I saw Zenith smiling like she used to. I thought that maybe staying like this would be okay. It was true. I couldn't kill Zenith.

But Vita.

I'd already remembered. I'd remembered the people who weren't here—Sylphie and Roxy and Eris, the goofy children we'd had together. The happy, irreplaceable family I'd given everything I had to build. The most precious thing I had. Zenith wasn't like Paul. She was in a sort of vegetative state, but she wasn't dead.

I already knew all that.

Getting a straight answer might be difficult, but through the Blessed Child I could even ask her for advice when Sylphie was in a foul mood, or Roxy was sulking, or Eris blew up at me. Zenith couldn't smile anymore, but I knew she'd be overjoyed to give me advice. So this was over. This dream I'd wanted to stay submerged in forever. This dream of a cheerful and kind Zenith. I faced Zenith, reached out, and touched her face.

“Thanks for everything, Mom.”

Then I fired a full-power Stone Cannon at her.

I felt like I'd had a devastating dream. *What the hell did that asshole Vita show me?* I thought. I didn't feel angry. Probably because the final dream had been so kind. Instead, I felt peaceful. Strangely peaceful.

I looked around and saw I was in an unfamiliar room without a door. Three chairs were arranged within it. No other furniture in the room, but it felt messy somehow. The vibe reminded me of my own room. Like they'd taken the average of my room from when I was alive and my current study. I was sitting on one of the chairs. In front of me were two people. Or were they animals?

The first was a skeleton. It wore a crown and was covered in black grime. The other was a slime. Probably. It was a blue lump shaped like a jelly, sitting on a chair. At least, it seemed like it was sitting.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Abyssal King Vita,” said the slime. This translucent, blue slime was his true form.

“You’re Vita?” I asked. All right, who was the skeleton, then? Not Paul, surely? I didn’t remember what state Paul’s bones had been in, but that crown wouldn’t suit Paul.

“I suppose I lost our fight,” said the slime with a solemn air—I didn’t know where its face was. I had to rely on its tone of voice. *I lost*, he’d said. That meant we’d been fighting, even though *how* felt hard to pin down. What I’d done to escape from that dream was a kind of battle, I guess.

“So you used, what, some kind of illusion magic to give me visions?” He’d made me dream. Incredibly happy dreams. If I hadn’t caught on, they would have gone on forever.

“Yes. I predicted possible futures based on your memories and blended them with your desires. It was a top-quality hallucination.”

Illusion magic. I suppose that had to be possible.

Possible futures... For all that, there’d been a lot of holes in those illusions when I looked back on them. Worlds without Sylphie or Roxy or Eris, where Paul, who was dead, kept on popping up.

“You have a very strong libido, so that made it easy.”

“I’m celibate at the moment,” I admitted. Oof, that was embarrassing. I’d been with Sara *and* Linia *and* Ariel *and* Aisha. I’ll admit I *might* be lying if I said I didn’t have *any* feelings for any of them—except for Aisha! There’s nothing there! I said nothing!

“My love for my wives and my memories of Paul broke through the illusion. Is that right?”

I’d seen this kind of illusion magic in my previous life. Or rather, I knew what I’d learned from manga. The point is, I knew the typical ways you broke through it. Maybe my subconscious mind had put that knowledge to use.

There was a pause, then Vita said, “No, don’t be ridiculous. You were totally taken in by the illusion. It’s true, the illusion’s hold on you was weaker due to the unique nature of your psyche...but once you’ve been taken that far in, breaking out isn’t possible.”

I was stumped. “So why’d the illusion break?” I asked.

“Because,” Vita said, “of that.” He pointed at the skeleton. It sat up straight in its chair.

“What is it?”

“Please, don’t play the fool... You foresaw that we would battle, that’s why you were ready from the beginning, isn’t it? With the bone ring of Raxos, my nemesis. Now I come to think of it, *that’s* why you so ostentatiously took your ring of disguise off in front of Ruijerd—to conceal the ring on your left hand...”

Raxos’s bone ring? I didn’t remember bringing anything like that... *Wait, Death God Raxos? The Death God’s ring! The one Randolph gave me! That’s right, I’d been wearing it!*

“Raxos’s bone ring was crafted by Death God Raxos for the purpose of killing me. It takes the form of the deceased person most trusted by the wearer to break the illusion, then corners the illusionist by taking away their hiding places. It only activates for wearers who have such a trusted person, though...”

Trusted person... In other words, Paul suddenly appearing in the dream was the doing of the bone ring. It was true, the shock of Paul’s appearance had forced me to confront the fact that none of it was real. After I realized I was dreaming, he’d given me the hints I needed to corner Vita. It wasn’t sloppy illusion magic on Vita’s part.

“It seems I was a little dismissive in my assessment of you. I was expecting it to go better at the end, too. Ah well. No one told me you were the sort of heartless man who’d raise a hand against his own mother.”

I hadn’t expected an attack like this. I hadn’t meant to conceal the ring, either. Actually, I’d been wracked with indecision. I’d wanted to spend more time with Zenith while she was healthy. I’d even gone along with an arranged marriage out of duty to her. After what she said to me at the end, I had no choice but to step away. The real Zenith would have told me to do the same. I’m sure she would.

“I made a mistake...” Vita said. “If I’d known, I’d have made Ruijerd threaten you instead.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Ruijerd was considering joining you even if it meant leaving his village to die. I panicked.”

Ruijerd...

“You were off your guard, so I thought everything would go smoothly. I never imagined you had a plan in place to counter me...or that you’d set a trap to ensnare me...”

It’d been entirely unintentional. I almost felt like I should apologize or something. Maybe Orsted or Death God Randolph *had* predicted something like this. It’d be nice if Orsted at least could have told me how to deal with it in advance. To be fair, he *did* tell me to wear the ring. So maybe he’d stayed quiet about the rest. I could imagine him thinking *He only has to wear the ring for it to work? Then the Abyssal King isn’t worth worrying about.*

He could have explained it! What if someone else had ended up possessed?

To be fair, this wasn’t the first time Orsted had failed to convey any more than the bare minimum information, nor the first time I’d failed to ask for more.

“Pride goes before a fall, I suppose.”

“Indeed it does,” Vita said ruefully. He shrank before my eyes, as though his strength was rapidly draining out of him. Beside him, the skeleton slowly crumbled.

The dead person I trusted most... That’s who Paul was to me?

“After reigning for centuries as the most powerful king in the Stickies’ history, I never dreamed things would end like this. Well done, Quagmire Rudeus.”

How was I supposed to respond to that? I hadn’t seen this coming. Should I tell him it was luck? Well, maybe not luck. I *had* gone to see Randolph of my own volition.

I considered telling him *You can’t call yourself the most powerful king ever*, but ditched that idea. There was something I needed to ask him.

“I have one question. Are you a disciple of the Man-God?”

“Yes, I am. I am indebted to Him. He helped me to escape the clutches of Death God Raxos and showed me the way to Hell on the Divine Continent. I’ve only survived this long thanks to Him... But then I left, and look where it got me. I suppose it was fate.”

Vita shrank smaller and smaller. When we first got to this room, he’d been person-sized, but now he was only as big as a fist.

“Let me tell you one last thing, Rudeus,” he said. I waited. “The Man-God is awful, but there are many like me who will put their faith in Him simply because He saved them.” Vita was now the size of a fingertip. Meanwhile, the skeleton crumbled into dust and blew away.

“Wait! The other disciples...!” I shouted, but my awareness faded.

My eyes opened. I felt wide awake. I remembered all of it—the dreams and the conversation from the room at the end.

“Ugh.” I was seized by a sharp pain in my stomach and felt the urge to puke. “Bleargh...” I moaned, bending over on all fours as I vomited up a sticky fluid. It was blue. The blue fluid oozed over the ground, mixed with stomach juices and last night’s dinner.

Was this...Abyssal King Vita’s corpse?

Just then, I felt a strange sensation in my left hand. I removed my gauntlet and the Death God’s ring fell to the ground in shattered pieces. It sank into my puke with a squelching sound.

The ring had broken. I guess that confirmed Vita’s story. By entering my body of his own accord, Vita had committed suicide via the Death God’s ring. Poor guy.

Was this a bad call on Vita’s part, really? If he’d taken control of me, the Man-God would have as good as won. There would have been nothing I could do to stop it...

It was a coincidence—or maybe I ought to call it fate—that had stopped him. Raxos’s bone ring hadn’t only been good for making Kishirika talk after all. Randolph himself might not have known the ring’s real power, either.

“Oh, right,” I said, looking around. “What about Ruijerd?” I was inside a building. This floor, these walls, this layout... I knew this place. It was Ruijerd’s house.

Considering what had happened, maybe Ruijerd had carried me here after Vita jumped from him to me? It was light outside. How many hours had passed? I decided cleaning up the puke could wait until after I’d found him.

“Ruijerd?” I called, but the master of the house didn’t reply. Maybe he was out. Or maybe there was another reason. For the time being, I’d survey my surroundings. I needed to see what was going on.

I sat up. Right away, I found Ruijerd. He was lying on the ground on the other side of the hearth.

“Rui—” I began, then broke off, speechless. Ruijerd’s face was gray and he was wheezing, shivering violently as he clutched at himself.

Oh, this was *bad*.

It reminded me of something he’d said. *If Abyssal King Vita dies, his offshoots die as well. The village will be engulfed by the plague again.*

So Ruijerd was in this state because...

“The...the plague...”

Abyssal King Vita hadn’t just died quietly. Yeah, what he’d done had been more than an inadvertent suicide... It was a suicide bombing.

Chapter 6: The Plague

RUIJERD HAD SAID TO ME that if Vita died, the plague would start to advance again. I hadn't imagined it would be so immediate.

Maybe Vita hadn't slowed the disease. He could have simply numbed them to it. Then he'd possessed me and died, so the offshoots had died too. The symptoms had all thundered to the surface at once...or something.

Hey, I didn't take Vita out. It was suicide. As much as a relief it was to know there were Rudeus-level blockheads on the Man-God side, I couldn't rest easy knowing he was dead. Ruijerd was suffering and there was nothing I could do for him. Not one thing.

I stormed out of the house just as Chandle came running over.

"Master Rudeus!" he greeted me.

"Chandle!"

"I'm glad to see you awake. The villagers all started collapsing without warning. I don't know what happened..."

"Abyssal King Vita died, and now the plague is active again."

"What?! When? How did you kill him?!"

"He just...died, okay?!"

Killed, died, either works.

"I'd like a full explanation!"

"Um..."

An explanation. He wanted to know what Ruijerd had told me the previous night. How Vita had slid down my throat through mouth-to-mouth contact and made me hallucinate, and how the Death God's ring killed him.

"...I see. So the Abyssal King challenged you and ended up defeated... Sir Ruijerd was being controlled, then?"

“...We won’t know until he wakes up, but I don’t think he’d have carried me back to the village if he’d had any malicious intent,” I said.

“Very well.”

“What are you doing right now?”

“The Superd who can still move sent me to bring back the others who went out hunting. I’m going to tell them to guard the entrance to the village.”

Chandle was on the ball, of course, even though the disease had started spreading again moments prior. Talk about a star player.

“What about Dohga?”

“Dohga is getting the sick together in one place,” Chandle said. I followed his gaze and saw Dohga thumping past with a woman in his arms. A Superd child anxiously chased after them.

They were heading towards...the elders’ hall. Made perfect sense, seeing as it was the biggest building in the village.

According to Chandle, no one had died yet. But more than half of the villagers had symptoms so severe they were incapacitated, just like Ruijerd.

“What’s your plan, Master Rudeus?”

“My...plan?” Words escaped me. What was I supposed to do at a time like this? The village was in the grip of the plague. We needed to cure it. That meant detoxification magic. But earlier, I’d tried detoxification magic on Ruijerd to no effect.

I hadn’t been able to try every kind of healing magic, but it seemed likely that detoxification magic wasn’t effective here. There were plenty of diseases and sicknesses like that. If detoxification magic wouldn’t work, the best thing to do was leave it to an expert on diseases. What experts were there? Would Ariel send me a doctor if I asked?

No one in the world knew more about diseases than Orsted. Except when it came to the Superd, he’d... No. Never mind that. I’d see what I could do.

Communication came first. It was three days back to the magic circle I’d set up... *Wait!* I’d already set up a backup teleportation circle in the

basement of the office just in case something like this happened. I could put a magic circle and contact tablet in this village. I'd go back to the office and explain what was going on to Orsted. Then, from the CEO's office, I'd tell all our allies about the current crisis. *I've got this.*

"We'll set up a teleportation circle in the back of the village, go back to the office, then send word to everyone asking for someone who can diagnose this."

"Understood. Then I'll work on defending the village and nursing the sick."

"Thank you." We wrapped up the meeting quickly, then I rushed off to the edge of the village. In the middle of this deep forest, we had a high concentration of magical energy. I could probably set up a teleportation circle here without even using magic crystals. I'd bring the spare tablets from the office as a precaution, then set up the circle.

Deep in thought, I made my way to the edge of the village. I went past the fence, then cut down the trees with magic to clear a space. Then I made a hut using earth magic. A hut without a door. I dug a tunnel into its floor and connected the tunnel to the village. This way, no monsters would get in. I took out my notebook and checked the circle that corresponded to the backup magic circle. If I drew it on the floor of the hut like this, it would probably disappear, so I decided to make a stone tablet with magic and draw the circle on that.

I couldn't rush it. The smallest mistake would prevent the magic circle from being completed. I'd need extra time if I had to hunt down any bugs, so I wanted to make it work on my first try if I could. It's never more important to stay calm than when you're in a hurry...

"Ah, crap..." Just as I thought that, I made a small mistake. "Whew..." I took a deep breath, calmed down, then forced myself to draw the circle even more slowly than usual. It was a planar magic circle, two meters in diameter. I was going to make errors if I tried to rush it.

I drew carefully. I'd drawn teleportation circles loads of times before; I was confident in my accuracy. Telling myself things like that to calm my nerves, I neatly finished the teleportation circle.

“Let’s try you out,” I said, pouring magic into it. It filled up with magic, then produced a faint glow.

“Fantastic.” I immediately jumped onto the circle.

After a moment of unconsciousness, I arrived beneath the offices. I quickly confirmed that the magic circle was operating normally, then ran out of the room.

I didn’t need the sign that read *This Way for Inquiries for Orsted and Rudeus*. I just headed for the surface. I left the basement room full of teleportation circles, climbed the stairs, and there I was in the lobby.

“Oh, Chairman, welcome ba—”

“Where’s the CEO?!” I demanded. When she saw my fierce expression, the reception girl’s ears twitched, then flattened in apprehension.

“H-he’s here,” she said. I didn’t wait for her to finish. I was already opening the door to the corridor that led to the CEO’s office.

I covered the distance of the short corridor and opened the door. I didn’t break it down, but I did forget to knock. Maybe that was why Orsted hadn’t put on his helmet.

“Sir Orsted,” I said. He didn’t reply. Maybe it was my imagination, but he looked uncomfortable, as though he knew something. He didn’t look away, though. He stared straight back at me. After a few seconds of looking, something in his face seemed to ask *Is there a problem?* I felt anger bubbling up within me. I knew that wouldn’t help right then, but when I spoke, I could hear the frustration in my voice.

“You knew about the Superd’s sickness, didn’t you?” I demanded.

“I did.”

“And the cure?”

“There isn’t one,” he said. He said it unequivocally. Not “I don’t know,” but “There isn’t one.”

“If you’d only told me earlier,” I said, “I could have at least searched for a way to treat it. *Why* didn’t you *tell* me?”

Orsted shook his head. “The Superd were supposed to have died out before you became my follower.”

“*Supposed* to... You mean it was always like that in the loops?”

“Correct. And Ruijerd Superdia never met the surviving Superd.”

Orsted hadn’t said anything because they were supposed to already be dead. In the other loops, that hadn’t affected Ruijerd. He’d clung on to that vain hope.

“But you went to see them a few years back, right?”

“I did,” Orsted admitted.

“You found the Superd and learned that Ruijerd had been in contact with them and contracted the plague, but you didn’t say anything.”

“That’s correct.”

“If you didn’t say anything, the Superd would die out and Ruijerd with them, and so I’d never know and give up. Is that what you thought?!” I realized I was yelling. I felt like Orsted had betrayed me.

“No. I thought it was a waste of time.”

“A waste...of time?”

“Yes. I tried to save the Superd as well. I tested every detoxification spell, every medicine with a chance of curing them. Nothing worked. This plague cannot be cured.”

So Orsted had tried everything he could think of?

“As far as I was concerned, the extinction of the Superd was set in stone. But you would have gone on trying to save them, fighting until the end, wouldn’t you?”

“That’s...” I said helplessly. “Of course I would.”

Except that this was two years ago...or even earlier than that. Orsted would have told me after the incident in the Kingdom of Shirone, back when we didn’t know where Laplace would be resurrected and decided to build up our forces. What would have happened if he’d told me about the Superd back then, and I’d gone running around hunting for a cure?

If nothing else, I couldn't have achieved any of the things I'd done in the past year. I couldn't have reached out to Atofe or Randolph or the other demon kings. I might not even have made it to Millis. I might still be unaware that Geese was a disciple of the Man-God.

"But perhaps," Orsted said hesitantly, "the decision of whether it is a waste of time...was not...mine...to make..."

I understood his reasoning, but my heart couldn't keep up. No excuses came to me. Orsted hadn't forgotten to tell me. He'd decided to keep it from me. He'd deliberately plotted to stop me from going to the aid of the Superd. I understood his reasoning, but I could never, ever forgive him. I owed my life to Ruijerd, and Orsted had left him to die. Usually, at this point, I'd tell myself that Orsted was like this, or like that, and I couldn't expect anything more from him. But this time, I couldn't forgive him.

Crap. At this rate, Orsted was going to start feeling like my enemy. Just when all our plans were in motion, and the enemy and everyone else was in the Biheiril Kingdom...

I had to think of an excuse for him. Something that would allow me to forgive him.

The question that came to me was "Will Ruijerd get in the way of your plans?" It was a departure from the flow of the conversation. What was I going to do if he said yes?

"He will not get in the way," Orsted said. "His daughter will be a crucial piece in the battle against Laplace."

"His daughter? How will she be crucial?"

"Laplace will be immortal when he becomes the Demon God, but he has a weakness. Only a Superd, with that third eye of theirs, will be able to detect it and deal him a killing blow."

"Oh." So only a Superd could strike the Demon God's weak point. Inside me, things clicked into place. Why Laplace had tried to transfer his curse to the Superd and kill them all. Why, even though Ruijerd was in a lower fighting class than the others, he'd been able to deal him such a blow that even Perugius had been grateful later. Why the Superd had contracted

the plague. Why the plague had only taken hold after Ruijerd arrived in the village, later than planned.

...Why I'd traveled to the Central Continent with Ruijerd.

The strength went out of me, and I staggered back. My legs caught on a chair and I fell heavily, but by putting my weight on the armrests I was able to stop myself from slipping any further.

"In the usual course of history, does Ruijerd survive?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Not only does he not die, but he also ends up having a child?"

"Yes."

"You planned to use that child to defeat Laplace, didn't you, Sir Orsted?"

"At first, yes. But not since I learned that Laplace is not immortal at the moment he's born."

"I see."

That meant this had to be the Man-God laying another bit of groundwork.

I saw it now. It'd been part of the plan to wipe them out, and he'd worked getting rid of me into the bargain. Two birds with one stone. Typical Man-God.

"Sir Orsted, I think the Man-God has been manipulating us again," I said. Orsted didn't reply. "The extinction of the Superd Clan and the plague—these aren't natural phenomena, they're the Man-God's work. Apparently, the Man-God would prefer Demon God Laplace to live."

There was no downside for the Man-God in having Demon Dragon King Laplace around—*Demon God* Laplace would be even better. He'd probably forgotten about the Man-God, after all. Not only that, but he'd also be intent on wiping out every living soul.

Maybe, against all expectations, the Man-God had been manipulating Laplace ever since the Laplace War. I was sure he couldn't directly control anyone from the Dragon Tribe, so it would be via a disciple.

I let out a deep breath. I'd found clarity in an unexpected place. Orsted hadn't told me about the Superd and, yeah, I still had some unresolved anger, but flying off the handle at him here wouldn't solve anything. In the end, it'd just give the Man-God a victory. *All according to plan*, he'd say glibly.

Maybe because I'd cleared my head, it came to me now. The excuse that hadn't occurred to me before. Orsted had left the Superd to their fate because, without knowing the way to cure them, he'd thought they were as good as dead. At first, the extinction of the Superd and Ruijerd's life were unconnected in his mind. He probably thought that Ruijerd was living his life somewhere else.

But, on the off chance, he'd gone to see the Superd and found Ruijerd was there. Not only there, but infected. Orsted didn't know how to tell me. Maybe he thought it was better not to say anything. Or was that it at all? Was he that kind? Ugh. Thinking like this was getting me nowhere.

"How were you planning on defeating Laplace without the Superd, Sir Orsted?"

"It's not impossible if we use the Godblade. It'll be a close battle; there's no avoiding that. But you're gathering allies. We can pull through."

"But the Godblade uses a fair bit of magic energy, right?"

"We don't have a choice."

Orsted was planning on taking the hit himself.

"I wanted to apologize to you," he said. "But I couldn't say it, and now it's come to this. I'm sorry." He bowed his head.

"I understand," I replied. Orsted wasn't perfect. These things happened. I'd open my heart and forgive him. "Just this once," I said. "I forgive you, Sir Orsted."

"Thank you."

That was out of the way. Time to swallow my ill feelings and look forward. I would move past this.

"Just to confirm, you're going to need magical power to defeat the Man-God too, right?"

“Yes.”

In the Kingdom of Shirone, the Man-God had prevented us from pinpointing the location of Laplace’s resurrection. Now, he’d reunited Ruijerd, the key to defeating Laplace, with the Superd in a bid to eradicate every one of them. With the Superd race wiped out, he could pit Orsted directly against Laplace in a battle where Orsted would expend a huge quantity of magic to win. This was the Man-God’s pathway to victory, and I was going to destroy it. Using the Godblade was a bad idea. If I avoided open battle wherever I could, I’d keep Orsted from expending too much magic. I’d assemble my forces to defeat Laplace, then have Orsted unleash his magic in the battle with the Man-God.

For that to work, I needed to make sure the Superd—Laplace’s Achilles heel—stayed alive.

“I’ll ask one more time. There’s no way to cure the plague, right?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Orsted said after a long pause.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know, Sir Orsted.”

“I suppose...that’s true,” he admitted with an even more terrifying look on his face than usual. Lately, I’d gotten to know this scary look. He wore it when he felt ashamed of himself.

“So it’s possible that a cure exists. Let’s fight on a little longer.”

There were lots of things Orsted couldn’t do because of the curse. Surely there were things we could try that he hadn’t tried before. If there were, I’d find them.

“Very well,” Orsted said. “I will go with you to the village.”

After that, I went on to my report on Abyssal King Vita. When I told Orsted that Vita had killed himself with the Death God’s ring, he made a scary face that concealed his surprise. Based on that reaction, he hadn’t known that Vita was possessing Ruijerd. The ring really had just been insurance.

Next, I sent word to everyone via the contact tablets, informing them of the Superd's sickness and requesting arrangements for a doctor. There were so many contact tablets that it took forever to contact everyone. *My kingdom for a CC function!*

While I waited for replies to my messages, I drew up more backup teleportation circles. There was a necessary process to go through when setting one up. I started out by drawing two circles, then, after checking they were operational, noted down the circle design for one of them and erased it. There was no rush to replenish them, but if we were going to use them, I would have to be the one to draw it.

We had the reception girl stand by in the CEO's office to answer messages and look after anyone who showed up via teleportation circle in Orsted's absence. The circles had grown so numerous lately that it was hard to keep track of what was connected to where. It was bad enough for Orsted and me to navigate; a first-time visitor would need a map. That map should probably say where you were in the village you teleported to.

Oh, yeah, it looked like Sylphie had already set off for the Sword Sanctum with Ghislaine and Isolde. Ariel had dropped by at the time and talked to Sylphie. Neither Orsted nor the reception girl had heard the contents of their conversation, but given there were no messages passed on, I assumed Ariel had just come to say hi.

After that dream, coming face-to-face with Ariel might have made me a bit self-conscious. I really didn't want Sylphie to be there to see me turn bright red when I saw Ariel.

Next, I checked that all our other guys spread throughout the Biheiril Kingdom had successfully set up their teleportation circles and contact tablets. Everything was chugging along well.

There were incoming messages. Aisha and the Mercenary Company were all okay. From Zanoba came a report that the hunting party was gathering in the capital. Roxy wrote that she was going to scout out the whereabouts of the Ogre God.

I sent messages about the current situation back to all of them. At the end, I added the line *I'll find a way to sort it out, so concentrate on your mission*. Otherwise, Eris would probably come running.

Next up, a lot of confirmations of receipt. Most of them said *We will look through past texts for information on the disease*. The Asura Kingdom said they'd send a doctor as soon as the following day.

But from the Holy Country of Millis, the only reply was to the message about reinforcements I'd sent last time. Sending in Knight Orders by teleportation circle was infeasible, apparently. Fairly *unfavorable*.

Millis really was taking its time to reply. I put it out of my mind and returned to the village with Orsted.

Orsted was now examining each of the Superd who'd collapsed. He likely had more medical knowledge than their doctors, but he hadn't understood it before, so there was no way he'd understand it now.

He wasn't a doctor in the first place. Maybe he'd tried to cure someone's sickness in past loops, but that wasn't the same as practicing medicine. It was more like fulfilling an errand quest in an RPG. Something like:

On XX-day the XXth of XX, Rudeus gets sick. Rudeus will die on XX-day the XXth of XX, so you have to cure him before then. You don't know the cure, but after a few rounds, you learn that Sylphiette has the same disease. Then Miss Roxy uses an item to heal her. Orsted can use Miss Roxy's item on Rudeus next round.

Maybe the way to deal with this was to compare past cases to present cases to look for a cure. I wasn't a doctor either, so I couldn't say for sure.

The thing about Orsted was that he didn't handle unexpected contingencies well.

"As I thought, I don't know," he said when he was done examining all of them, shaking his head in defeat.

"Although the presentation seems a little different from other plagues I know..." he continued.

"Different in what way?"

"I've never seen anything get this severe this quickly."

“So Vita probably *was* masking the symptoms, and now they’ve come to the surface.”

“If the Man-God is behind this, then it’s possible.”

It sounded like the Man-God’s style. He’d pretend to keep the disease from progressing while actually doing nothing.

“What about you? Did you learn anything?”

“No,” I said. While Orsted was investigating the disease, I’d asked the people providing medical care about how they treated the sick. They said they were cooking medicinal herbs popular on the Central Continent with nutritious vegetables to make a thick stew that they gave the patients. I wasn’t an expert on medicinal herbs or the nutritional value of vegetables, but I doubted it could do any harm. This course of treatment wasn’t doing any *good*, though. We needed to come at it from a different angle.

For example... Okay, under normal circumstances the plague would have spread through the village earlier. That meant the Man-God could control the plague. So maybe it was poison, or a virus that the Man-God had brought in from somewhere. On the other hand, maybe the displacement incident had upset the timing of the Superd contracting the disease. The Man-God was only trying to use that... You know what? Screw the “why.” What did that even matter?

The important thing at that moment wasn’t what the Man-God was up to. It was finding a cure for this disease.

The more I thought, the more my mind went around in circles. It felt like maybe there really wasn’t anything we could do. I didn’t enjoy the helplessness.

Still, it wasn’t over yet. We weren’t going to find a cure with just me, Orsted, Chandle, and Dohga on the job. Doctors were on their way. Right now, we’d concentrate on making sure the patients were clean and getting enough nutrition.

Sustained by that thought, I spent the full day looking after patients together with Chandle and Dohga.

The next day, the medical team from the Asura Kingdom arrived. There were two doctors, four nurses, and a heap of food and medical supplies. Ariel must have chosen a team who wouldn't fear the Superd. They took one look at the patients and got straight to examining them. I could only trust in Ariel's charisma to keep their mouths shut about the teleportation circles.

"We were told what to expect, but I've never seen symptoms like this before."

Despite the risk we'd taken in bringing them here, the medical team wasn't any help at all.

"We've treated demons back home... If it's a disease only particular demons contract under a specific set of circumstances, they're beyond our help."

The doctors' collective professional opinion was that they had absolutely no idea what'd caused the disease. It didn't match any past cases. That was more or less the answer I'd expected. Owing to the common use of healing magic and detoxification magic, diagnostic medicine in this world wasn't exactly advanced. If this sickness were simple enough that a doctor of this world could figure it out just by eyeballing a patient, Orsted would have taken care of it by now.

"We'll keep watching the patients just in case, but I wouldn't hold out hope," said the doctor. They were continuing with treatment for now. As little as I'd expected from this, it was crushing having someone say it straight to my face.

I sighed, looking around the hall where a few dozen Superd lay prone. Some moaned. Some were limp and unmoving, and some you couldn't tell if they were unconscious or asleep. Some were being fed. Seeing all of them lying there while the others nursed them was like looking at a battlefield hospital. The death count was still zero, but so many patients suffered from severe symptoms. It was only a matter of time.

Ruijerd was among the most severe cases. He was unconscious now, in a coma. Every now and then his eyes would snap open and he'd cough violently. He didn't have long.

Sitting at his bedside, I thought *I want to do anything I can to cure him*. I had no moves left. I couldn't think of a plan to break out. The hours slipped by while I just sat there.

Even if doctors arrived from Millis or the King Dragon Realm, their chances of finding a cure were dismal based on the way this was going.

If they didn't find a cure, what then? Who would know? What should I do? What *could* I do?

"Master Rudeus." I realized Chandle was standing in front of me.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry to bring it up, given the circumstances, but...what do you want to do about the informant?"

The informant? Who was that again?

The memory came back. The guy we'd met back in the Second City of Irelil and asked to search for Geese.

"How many days until we agreed to meet him again?" I asked.

"It was a day from the city to the town, then two days to reach here. You slept for a day, then there was yesterday, and today is almost over. I suppose we have four days left. If we're a day or so late I'm sure that can be smoothed over, though."

I hadn't been stuck in my dreams as long as I'd feared, thankfully, but we had to turn back already.

"The teleportation circle gives us a few days' leeway, but still..."

"You're right. When the day comes around, I'll go," I said. I didn't want to leave, but my main objective was still to search for Geese. I had no choice.

"I will accompany you."

"What, and leave only Sir Orsted and Dohga here?"

"Leaving you alone is riskier, Master Rudeus."

I was struck by a momentary suspicion that he had another motive, but his point was valid. Nothing good could come out of me acting alone.

“Apart from the informant, Master Rudeus, what do you want to do about the hunting party?”

“What hunting party?”

“The one the Biheiril Kingdom is assembling. We were told that in another month it would form up and attack the village, remember?”

“Oh...” Right. I had that to worry about too.

“In my opinion, we ought to move against them early. What do you think?”

It was true that the best way to protect the Superd would be to intervene and negotiate with the Kingdom. That had to rest on the understanding that the Superd race posed no risk to humans, or it'd never work. The Superd didn't bear any hostility towards humans. I could still prove that, even now, but would it be enough?

“There's no guarantee they won't just see the plague and decide to exterminate them while they're weak. Let's at least wait to see if the plague can be cured or not.”

“You want to leave it, then?”

“Hm. That's a bad idea, isn't it? What do you think we should do?”

“After meeting with the informant, I think it'd be worthwhile to go to the palace to explain who the devils really are and what has befallen them. If they decide to purge them to end the plague, we fight. But if they decide to help, that'll conclude negotiations. Right?”

“Right...” I agreed. “You're right.”

For the moment, we'd try it and see. That's all there was to it.

After four days, I'd move. I had a mountain of things to do and no clue of how to go about them. My impatience at our lack of progress intensified. It was exhausting...

I fell asleep for the day, alone in Ruijerd's house and overwhelmed by my thoughts.

I woke to someone shaking me. A pretty girl swam into focus in front of my eyes. She had silky blonde hair with bangs cut to just above her

eyebrows. I knew exactly who this was.

“Rudeus, wake up! Rudeus...!”

It was Norn. *Ah, another dream. Another illusion.* This time Norn was my wife. I supposed Vita was still alive. I hoped that meant the Superd’s condition had been a dream too.

“Vita needs better material...” I mumbled.

“Vita? Are you still half asleep?! I need you to concentrate!”

Norn was cross. She hadn’t gotten like this so much lately, but back in the day, it felt like she never stopped being angry at me. It really took me back, seeing her all in a huff.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Ruijerd was in this condition?!”

At that, I snapped awake. I sat up in a room with a floor covered in animal skins. Ruijerd’s house. This wasn’t a dream.

“After everything Ruijerd did for me...! Not telling me he was like this... How could you?” Tears began to stream from Norn’s eyes. She didn’t bother to wipe them away as she clutched tightly at the pelts on the floor. Absently, I reached out to brush the teardrops away with my fingers.

“Yeah, I’m sorry...” I said, but then a question occurred to me. Why was Norn here? She was supposed to be busy now.

“Norn, um, maybe this isn’t a good time to ask, but didn’t you have a school event...?”

“That finished ages ago!”

What?! Did that mean graduation was over too? It couldn’t be... What about me at the graduation ceremony, dabbing my eyes with a hankie? No—never mind. That wasn’t important right now.

“...How did you get here?”

“Cliff! He told me everything, then brought me with him!” Norn said. Hiccupping, she turned to look behind her. There, framed in the entrance, stood two figures, shadows against the backlight. One cut a more slender silhouette. The light caught on her blonde hair, making it sparkle. Her slim elven figure was bewitching. The other was a man. He was shorter than

average, and not especially broad either. Despite that, he seemed weathered and reliable... Maybe it was the patch over one of his eyes.



“Rudeus,” said Cliff Grimor, “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here. It took a while to go through all the necessary procedures... The Millis Church isn’t a monolith. You’ll have to forgive me.”

He’d come. He’d read the message I sent him on the contact tablet and immediately tried to get here for me.

“Now that I’m here,” he went on, “it’s going to be okay. Times like this are why I studied healing magic.”

“But Cliff...”

“Yes, I know. They told me everything. But I have *this*,” he said, tapping the eye beneath his eyepatch. It was the Demon Eye he got from Kishirika. The Eye of Identification.

“This can be sorted out with a Demon Eye?”

“A Demon Eye might not be enough. Just remember, the one using it is *me*,” Cliff said, “and I’m a genius.”

Maybe he said it to reassure Norn, who was crying her eyes out. Maybe he said it to reassure me in my exhaustion. He might have been nervous, needing a rallying cry for himself. Whatever it was, Cliff seemed to stand taller after those words. That he could talk so confidently at a time like this—he was a giant. Had Cliff ever looked this tall on any day before today? He had to be twice my height already. Cliff was here! Cliff, who could even break curses!

“Nothing is impossible for a genius,” he said. “Leave it to me.”

He was going to handle it. I didn’t doubt him for a second, even though I knew neither of us had a reason to believe he could help.

Chapter 7: The Genius

FIRST, Cliff hurried to the patients' bedsides.

"Looking at the patients' condition is the most basic of the basics," he said as he went through examining each one of them.

He wasn't doing much different from what the medical team had done, which worried me. He used the Demon Eye to look at the people with severe symptoms, talked to the ones with mild symptoms, and cross-referenced with the charts the medical team had made.

"Like I'd talk to a Millis...ackh, ackh!"

Some of the patients looked scared when they saw Cliff's clothes, some were outright hostile. The most intense persecution faced by the Superd had come from the Millis Church. They remembered that.

"Forget that and answer. When did you first feel something was wrong?"

Cliff wasn't worried about it in the slightest, even though none of them would cooperate with him. If it were me, I'd have despaired halfway through. That was Cliff for you.

"I see..." Cliff said. After he'd gone around all the patients, he acted like something had fallen into place for him. I was pretty sure he still didn't understand a thing yet. Cliff might be a genius, but there are limits to anyone's understanding...I think. Cliff might be a priest, a healing magician, and a researcher, but he still wasn't a doctor.

"I'll talk to the doctors in charge next," he said, then went to interrogate the medical team. He asked the two doctors from Asura how they'd examined the patients and what they planned on doing next.

"We're going to use detoxification magic in conjunction with medicine and see how things go."

"So much for the doctors of the Asura Kingdom, huh?" Cliff said, snorting. The doctor and I stared at him in disbelief. Such arrogance...!

Maybe the Superd's reaction to him was getting under his skin. Had he just always been like this?

"If that were enough to find a cure, Rudeus or Orsted would have cured them long ago."

"Then what do you suggest, Master Cliff?"

"That's what I'm going to investigate now," he replied. The doctor scowled. *Whoa there, Mister Doctor, settle down. If it all goes wrong, blame him all you like then. Right now, let's just settle down.*

I was uneasy, though. He'd seemed so reliable earlier, but was he? Norn seemed unsure as well. She glanced anxiously at us from where she sat nursing Ruijerd across the room.

"All right, then. Rudeus, let's go outside," Cliff said. We left the doctors and went out of the hall.

Cliff stopped just after we left the hall to go over our results.

"I learned one thing. I talked to an elder and even that guy said the Superd Tribe has never had this sickness before."

"Never? How old is the elder?"

"Over a thousand years old."

Superd folks lived for a *really* long time...

"They were infected after coming to this land. My conclusion is that the source of the disease is in the land itself."

"Is it possible the Man-God brought in poison?"

"It's not that. My eye would see that sort of thing," Cliff said, tapping his temple on the side of the eyepatch. We set off around the village. Our first stop was the field. Cliff took off his eyepatch and went through the area, checking every vegetable growing there. Some he broke open to look at their insides. He cracked open a juicy tomato right there in front of me.

If the world knew that the Superd engaged in ordinary agriculture, that might improve their reputation a little. After all, humans feel kinship with creatures that do the same things we do.

“Next,” Cliff said. We went to the place where they butchered the beasts. There were a few bloodstains, but otherwise it was spick-and-span. A few villagers had collapsed in the middle of butchering an animal, but it was obviously dangerous to leave raw meat lying around, so Chandle had given instructions for it to be disposed of outside the village.

Cliff used the Eye of Identification to look carefully at a knife and something like a chopping board.

“I see...” he said to himself. “Rudeus, do you know where the meat they cut up here is stored?”

“Um... This way.” I didn’t see, but I showed him to the provision store. It was partly underground and stocked full of large quantities of dried meat, salted meat, and vegetables suited for storage. Cliff appraised all of it with the Eye of Identification.

“Did...did you learn anything?” I asked.

“Don’t rush. I need to look through all of it first.” We left the provision store, and Cliff started going through each of the houses in the village. He went inside, rummaging through the kitchens and bedrooms and even their spare clothes. This was a huge overstep. If I did the same thing in someone’s house everyone would shun me, but of course, Cliff was a hero.

One thing seeing the Superd houses showed me was just how sparse Ruijerd’s house was. The others had flowers, or children’s drawings scrawled on the pillars... You could feel their liveliness and smell the smells of everyday life. These little outfits must be for a child. Of course, when the residents had mild symptoms and were home, we got permission.

“The Millis Church...!”

“M-Mom...”

“It’s okay. Please calm down, he’s safe.”

One person saw Cliff in his priest’s robes and started threatening him with a spear, but that didn’t hinder us from getting permission.

“Lies! The Millis Church took one look at us and...ah...agggh...”

“Mom? Mom?!” The mother trembled as though she were reliving some memory. Her daughter looked like she might cry as she clung to her mother.

I sensed the unbridgeable gap between the Superd and the Millis Church. To Cliff and me, the persecution of the Superd was ancient history. To the victims here in this village, their memories were still raw.

“Now, what kind of things do you usually eat? How do you cook it?”

Cliff didn’t read the room. He repeated his question like he didn’t even see how terrified the mother and her trembling child were. “Answer me, quickly. We don’t have much time.”

He kept asking until they answered.

“Hmm.” Cliff went through all the houses in the same way. I don’t think he found anything decisive. It was more instructive about the Superd culture than anything else.

“Um, Cliff?”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Rudeus. They weren’t afraid of me, they were just afraid of the robes. If I cure this disease while wearing the robes, it’ll change their minds. Right?”

Would it be that simple? I wondered. The little girl from before might change her thinking, at least. I hoped it was that easy.

“Right, next,” Cliff said. We went around each location in the village. The spring in the center, the well, the storehouse, the materials shed, and finally the trash heap outside the village.

Cliff looked over each of them with painstaking exactitude. His face was grave as he rummaged through the trash heap and picked through the rotten beast meat. Who knew what the Eye of Identification was showing him? All I could do was answer his questions. We looked over the whole village until the sun had fully set, then we went back to the hall.

“So what do you think, Cliff?”

“I have some thoughts.”

“Yeah?”

“Lise, bring me my medicine kit!” Cliff shouted across the hall repurposed as a medical center. Elinalise, who was nursing the patients,

immediately stood up and came running. She grabbed the large backpack placed in a corner of the medical center, then returned to us.

“Yes siree!” she said.

“Thanks, Lise.”

Elinalise looked happy. Maybe it was because it’d been so long since she’d last seen Cliff. Their children... She might have left them at my place?

“Listening, Rudeus?” Cliff said. “The infections follow a set course.”

“Oh?”

“Having said that, I’m not a doctor, so I can’t be any more specific. The Superd first contracted the disease when they came to this land. That’s why I inspected the food they were growing here with the Eye of Identification.”

“Okay, and?” I prompted eagerly.

“I found no abnormalities.”

What...?

“I didn’t detect anything lurking in the earth or the water.”

“The Eye of Identification tells you all that?”

“Yes. We can trust their food, at least.”

So the food was all clear. That was Kishirika’s Demon Eye for you. It’d instantly pick up any food that would give you food poisoning or worse.

“Only, they all display like this,” Cliff said, then recited, “*A tasty-lookin’ tomato packed full of highly concentrated mana.*”

Apparently, the Eye of Identification used colloquial language.

“It’s not just the vegetables. It’s the soil and the water too. They’re all packed with extremely highly concentrated mana.

“It’s come back with ‘packed with highly concentrated mana’ in Millis before too. But it’s very rare, and never for the soil or the water.”

Concentrated mana, huh? Come to think of it, Aisha had said that the rice she planted in soil I made grew well. Maybe that was because of the highly concentrated mana.

“What does that mean?”

“I have a question for you. Was there much agriculture on the Demon Continent?”

“I don’t know how the Superd lived on the Demon Continent, but I hardly saw any vegetables there. There aren’t *none*, but there aren’t many varieties. Meat is the staple.”

“Just as I thought,” Cliff said. He raised a finger, then started to explain his hypothesis. “When you plant vegetables in mana-rich soil, the produce you grow will also be mana-rich. But there are a lot of different kinds of soil. I imagine the soil on the Demon Continent is just as mana-rich but has no nutrients. Vegetables won’t grow there.

“We don’t see this kind of disease in the Great Forest, so this forest must be special. The soil here is extremely high in nutrients and bursting with mana, just like the water. The result is mana-rich plants. There being only one species of monster here may be related, but the root cause isn’t important right now.

“The thing is, under normal circumstances, none of this should be an issue. We go about our daily lives without thinking about things like this. If it’s related, we should see similar cases cropping up all over the place. Under normal circumstances, we’re able to cleanly expel the mana we take in. The Superd shouldn’t be too different.

“What happens, though, if you continuously take it in? Not for ten or twenty years, but a hundred, two hundred years of ingesting highly concentrated mana? What then?

“Despite the plague’s virulence, adults make up most of the infected. The children are fine.” At this point in the explanation, Cliff turned to look at me.

It was true, there were a lot of healthy children for a plague. With the Superd it was hard to tell who the elderly were, but I guessed that meant it wasn’t a problem of immunity.

“And I’m sure we know what happens when mana is taken into the body and not fully expelled.”

What happens when mana isn’t fully expelled... He means Nanahoshi!

“So is this Dryne Syndrome?” I asked. He might be on to something. The early symptoms looked like a cold, and the patients became bedridden as the illness became acute. Wouldn’t Orsted have caught it, too? Maybe not. Dryne Syndrome was an old disease, so Orsted might not know the cure—he might not even know the name. Right, if no one crucial got sick in the loop, Orsted had no way to know about it. He couldn’t go ask Kishirika about it, like I’d done.

“But there are a lot of differences,” I pointed out. “Not enough time has passed since Ruijerd came to this village.”

“That’s true...” Cliff acknowledged. “But Abyssal King Vita’s main body was possessing him, right? That might be why. Regardless, surely it’s worth considering.” Cliff pulled a box out of the backpack. Inside, it was stuffed full of a variety of leaves and seeds. He took one out. It was dried, but I recognized it as Sokas Grass.

“I got hold of some just in case something like this happened,” he said.

Cliff had come prepared.

“We’ll also use this.” He fished a red berry out of a corner of the box.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It forms the base of a poison that blocks the mana in your body.”

“It’s...a poison?”

“Well, I say poison, but its only effect is to stop a magician who imbibes it from using magic.”

If I took that it’d literally be lethal... Could I really give the Superd something like that?

“According to the Eye of Identification, it was taken together with Sokas Tea long ago. The Eye says, *It enhances the effect of Sokas Grass and goes well with tea, creating a pleasant sense of intoxication.*”

In other words, Kishirika didn't see it as poison.

"The problem is," Cliff went on, "I don't know what will happen if I give it to the Superd now. If my hypothesis is correct, this will cure them. But it could also have the opposite effect."

I felt sure it'd be okay...but if it made the plague any worse, people could die. There was no guarantee.

After a moment's silence, Cliff said, "Oh, well. Overthinking it won't help. Let's ask." Full of determination, he turned to the medical center and shouted, "I have a medicine I want to try for your sickness! Is anyone here willing to take it?"

"Wha—! Just a—! Cliff!" I spluttered.

The medical center went dead silent. They looked at Cliff, then at his clothes. Some turned pale, others averted their eyes.

"I only need one of you!" he said. "There's no guarantee it will cure you!"

He didn't need everyone to take it just to see the effect. One person would do. No one volunteered.

"The Millis Church can't be trusted," someone said, breaking the silence. It was one of the men who'd been at the meeting with the chief. We were never going to win over the room at this rate. But what were we supposed to do? We couldn't force the medicine down their throats.

Then, someone raised his hand. "I'll...take it..." he rasped. He sat up unsteadily, his piercing eyes on us. Beside him, supporting him, was Norn.

"Ruijerd! You're awake?"

"Um, yes." It was Norn who answered. "He opened his eyes just now, Rudeus..." But then other voices broke out around her, drowning her out.

"Ruijerd, you'd trust a man from the Millis Church?"

"They chased us around the world after the war!" The most virulent anger was from the younger Superd. This seemed to draw in the medical team, who began to protest as well.

"You want to give them some totally unknown substance? I've never heard anything like it!" one said.

“Did you even study medicine properly?!” demanded the other. The doctors’ fears propagated through the room as the Superd who’d kept silent up until now began to mutter.

An unknown medicine. And what’s more, it had been brought to them by a man clad in the robes of the Millis Church. Everyone was confused. Some dithered anxiously, others were openly outraged.

“Do you want us to go extinct?!” Ruijerd roared, and the medical center fell silent again. The mutterers shut up, faces pale. The ones who’d been uneasy looked down as well.

Ruijerd broke out into violent coughing, while Norn stroked his back. When it passed, he said softly, “Rudeus brought that man here, and I trust Rudeus. If you have complaints, save them until after I’m dead...”

It spoke volumes to Ruijerd Superdia’s importance in this village that not one person argued with him.

“Okay then, Ruijerd. You’ll take the medicine. I’ll tell you in advance: there’s a chance it’ll make you worse. You might die.”

“That’s fine. I’ve lived a good life. I can die without regret.”

What about my regrets? This isn’t for the Superd Tribe. It’s for you, Ruijerd. See? Look at the face Norn is making. She agrees.

The room went silent again until another man raised his hand. “If Ruijerd is taking it, I’ll take it too.” He was young, with comparatively mild symptoms. Actually, for all I knew he was an old man. “Ruijerd saved me on the Demon Continent. I would have died back then. Nothing can scare me after that.”

This opened the floodgates. Hands went up with more and more people saying, “Me too.”

In the end, even the village elder raised his hand. “The Millis Church can’t be trusted, but Ruijerd is our champion. Whatever our champion decides, I’ll follow.” He turned to us and said softly, “Young churchman, I am sorry for my discourtesy earlier. Please, save our village.”

Cliff gave a determined nod.

After taking the red berries with the Sokas Tea, Ruijerd and the others fell asleep. They didn't drop dead the moment they took it, at least.

We'd know the results tomorrow...apparently. I obviously didn't expect the Sokas Tea to solve everything, but I wanted them to improve, if even by a little. Right now, though, the sun had set. I decided to call it a day. I stayed at Ruijerd's house. For some reason my feet naturally led me back there. Ruijerd hadn't given me his permission to sleep at his place, but it was where I wanted to stay.

“...”

I could tell Norn wanted to stay at Ruijerd's bedside, but she couldn't do anything while he was asleep, so she came with me.

Norn and I were sitting by the fire. We didn't speak. There were only two sounds: the crackling of the burning logs and the bubbling of the simmering water in the pot in the back of the hearth. Potatoes and meat brought by the medical team simmered away. Cliff said it was probably fine, but as you might imagine, I wasn't keen on eating food that might be poisoning everyone.

“Rudeus, Ruijerd is going to get better, right?” asked Norn suddenly. She must've been worried. *I* was worried.

“Yeah, he will.”

“Really?”

“I've never known Cliff to fail once he's set his mind to something. He might not be able to do it tomorrow, but he'll cure them in the end.”

“Will Ruijerd still be alive by then?”

“Don't worry. You might know about Ruijerd from the Laplace War. He survived even though he was surrounded by over a thousand soldiers. He's not going to die in a place like this.”

I couldn't bring myself to say more.

“I'm worried...” Norn hugged her knees and buried her face in them. The mood was dark.

The stew needed to simmer for a little longer. It wasn't crucial that I lighten the atmosphere or anything, but feeling depressed wasn't helping.

All there was left to do for the day was eat and go to bed. I wanted to relax so we could at least get some food down and get a good night's sleep.

"By the way, Norn, is school all right with this?" I asked.

Norn looked up so that just half her face was visible. "...I already graduated," she said.

"About that, I wanted...um, I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

I'd missed it. No one had told me. Now I thought about it, Sylphie'd had the baby...yeah, it was already graduation season.

Roxy could have told me, at least... No, okay, if she'd reminded me and I couldn't go, it would've just weighed on me.

"You didn't have to come. It's fine," Norn said.

I wasn't having that—this was Norn's graduation ceremony! How could I have missed such an important event? What was I supposed to tell Paul up in heaven?

"I wasn't even top of my class..."

"But you were student council president. You must have made a speech, at least."

"I did the opening address, but I got tongue-tied in the middle. I almost tripped when I left the stage. It was awful."

I could see it now. Norn faltering during her speech, panicking internally as she tried to smooth it over, then trying to at least make a clean getaway but missing the step—somehow managing to keep her footing. I wished I'd seen it. Norn looked disgusted, but I wished I could've taken a video to put on Paul's grave as an offering.

"By the way, you said there was some kind of event before your graduation, right? What did you end up doing?"

"The year Cliff graduated you dueled a whole lot of people, right? We copied you and held a combat tournament."

"A combat tournament! That sounds great. Wasn't it dangerous?"

“We tried to minimize the risk as much as possible. The rules said no killing, and we borrowed the school’s Saint-tier healing magic circle and had a healing magician nearby. The teachers made plenty of healing magic scrolls for us. We also had all the participants sign a pledge. There were some injuries, but no deaths.”

That was impressive. At the level of graduating students at the University of Magic, both competitors would be able to use lethal magic. No deaths under those conditions? Luck probably came into it as well, but zero deaths was down to the solid system they set up.

“I wish I’d been there too.”

“It would have looked like child’s play next to your skills.”

“But a tournament! That’s always exciting.”

When I was a shut-in in my previous life, I’d taken part in a few online game tournaments. Sadly, I never achieved much, but with that caliber of participant, it was a rush just watching.

“By the way, did you have a trophy or something?”

“...We...did,” Norn said, then pouted. “Everyone on the student council put money in and we got a bouquet, a certificate, and a magic staff.”

It would’ve depended on the rank of the magic staff how expensive the whole prize package was, but it sounded like they’d splashed out with their limited budget.

“The moment Rimi saw the competitors were mostly boys, she announced, ‘The victor gets a passionate kiss from President Norn!’”

“What?!”

“Everyone was so excited. I wanted to back out, but I couldn’t.”

What the hell? A tournament to win a kiss from Norn? You couldn’t do that. It was *evil*. Outrageous. If I’d been there, I’d have put on a mask, competed in the tournament, and kicked all their little... Strike that. That was a bit of an overreaction.

“And so...did you do it?”

There was a long pause. “On the cheek.”

Well, that wasn't so dangerous after all. Norn had turned scarlet and buried her face in her knees, moaning with embarrassment. I guess to her it'd been a lot. After a little while, she flopped down onto the floor.

"They said I'll remember the winner my whole life... I wish I could forget it already."

"Yeah? What's his name? Give me his address and phone number. A mysterious masked magician might just wipe him off the face of the earth, along with all memory he was ever born."

"What's a phone?"

"Never mind."

Norn sat up, then sat herself back on the floor. This time she folded her legs to her side instead of hugging her knees.

"Anyway, it sounds like the tournament was a great success."

"I don't know. I thought we did well, but there were lots of bad parts... It feels like I messed everything up."

"That is what we call a great success," I told her. "I'm glad."

Norn went a little pink, but she nodded. "Thanks," she said. Her expression had brightened just a little.

"Right, the potatoes should be ready soon. Want some, Norn?"

"Yes, please." I spooned meat and potatoes into a bowl and handed it to her, then served myself. I hadn't eaten anything all day, and I felt like I was about to starve to death. Norn stared into the contents of her bowl, then started to eat. After a while, she piped up again. "Big Brother?"

"Hm?"

"Thank you so much."

"No worries."

"But this tastes terrible."

Sorry about that.

The next day, Norn and I set off at sunrise for the medical center in the hall.

My head was full of worry for Ruijerd. Thanks to the disgusting potato soup filling my belly, I'd at least gotten a good night's sleep. Even if things didn't go well, I had the stamina in reserve to nurse the sick. Bracing myself for a terrible scene, I opened the door to the medical center and gasped.

I was greeted by lively activity. Last night the medical center had felt like a wake, but now it buzzed with energy. Okay, that was overstating it. There wasn't that much vigor. But everyone looked way perkier than they had yesterday.

"Master Rudeus!" called one of the doctors. He saw me and came running. "Look at everyone! Look how they've improved!"

It was working. The Sokas Tea was working.

"Last night, everyone who drank the medicinal infusion all suddenly said they needed to defecate. The nurses escorted them to the outhouse. They all presented with light blue diarrhea. A little while after it passed, they began to rapidly improve. Those who had severe cases still can't stand, but I'm sure they'll be up before long!"

Poop talk first thing in the morning... Wait, what was that about light blue diarrhea?

"We're in the process of administering it to everyone, adjusting the infusion as we go. Wow, were we idiots to doubt him! I mean, this is genius stuff. Cliff Grimor, breaker of curses! Oh, gosh, I can't hang around here. I've still got work to do. I'd better be off!" After this one-sided announcement, the doctor ran off back to the patients.

I didn't remember mentioning any curse-breaking. I guess that was how Cliff introduced himself.

Anyway, light blue diarrhea? That reminded me of something. What was it? *Light blue... Light blue...*

"Rudeus." I realized a large shadowy figure was standing in front of me. A man dressed in white with a black helmet.

"Oh, Sir Orsted."

“Did you see their excrement?”

“Uh, not yet.”

Orsted bent down a little to whisper in my ear. “Those were the dead offshoots of Abyssal King Vita.”

Abyssal King Vita. That name conjured up an odd thought. What if—only *what if*, mind you—the plague wasn’t Dryne syndrome?

Abyssal King Vita had spread his offshoots throughout the village, and in doing so, he had stalled the progress of the disease. I’d thought that Vita was just numbing them to the symptoms while leaving the plague unchecked... What if Vita had cured the plague long ago? Then he’d used his offshoots to make the villagers sick, just to scare them. When he died, he summoned the last of his power to make the offshoots keep working their poison. The red berries and Sokas Tea had broken them down in the patients’ intestines or wherever they’d been lodged and flushed them out... Maybe. I mean, that was all just conjecture.

“We simply had to be persistent. Just like you said.”

“Just like I said,” I replied.

Well, whatever. For now, the crisis was over. Abyssal King Vita had been defeated completely. That’s how I was going to look at it.

“What’s Cliff doing?”

“He was up all night observing the patients, but he fell asleep around dawn. He’ll be in the empty house nearby with Elinalise Dragonroad.”

You don’t say? Cliff really gave everything he had. Let’s leave him to rest up. Even if he was bound to get straight to work on kid number two with Elinalise when he woke up, he’d need that energy.

“Ruijerd Superdia just woke up too,” Orsted went on.

“Really?!”

“He did. You should go and see him.”

“You’ll excuse me!” I bowed, then headed for the back of the medical center, making a beeline for where Ruijerd had slept yesterday. There he was. He was sitting up in bed, his color was good, and he was eating.

“Ruijerd!” Norn ran over and hugged him around the middle the moment we reached him. “Thank goodness... Oh, I’m so glad...” She was weeping. Norn was such a crybaby. Ruijerd looked baffled, but he wiped his mouth, put his bowl of food down to one side, and stroked Norn’s head. I just watched them for a while, not saying anything. I felt a bit like crying too.

After a time, Ruijerd looked up and said, “Rudeus.”

“Ruijerd, you’re... Are you better now?”

“Yes. I can’t swing a spear yet, but I am better.”

All right. Thank goodness... I’m so glad... I wasn’t mimicking Norn—that was all I could think.

“I am indebted to you again.”

“Don’t mention it. Besides, we don’t know that you’re fully cured yet. Don’t get complacent.”

“Indeed.”

When Ruijerd and I started talking, Norn detached herself from Ruijerd’s waist, sniffing, then covered her face with her hands and began to hiccup. She was blushing scarlet right to the tips of her ears.

“But I have something to say first, Rudeus,” Ruijerd went on.

“What is it?” He looked serious in a way that made me a little anxious. Was there something else? Was the shocking truth about to be revealed now, at this moment? I braced myself.

“When I’m fully recovered, I will help you.”

I was speechless. What was this sensation I felt welling up in my chest? Ruijerd and I were going to work together again. Was this...elation?

Yeah. I was happy. Plain happy.

“Thank you, I...I’ll be glad to have you beside me.” I gulped down whatever was rising in my throat and suppressed the tears welling in my eyes. I held out a hand to him.

“I’ll be glad to be there,” Ruijerd said, taking my hand. His grip was warm and strong.

Interlude: Somebody to Someone

I HAD NOTHING TO DO in the days after I graduated from the University of Magic. Okay, Headmaster Janus invited me to come and work at the Magicians' Guild, but I was putting off replying. It sounded nice, sure. I'd been student council president at the University of Magic, so they'd probably treat me well. More than that, though, I was pretty unused to having my work recognized and my talents in demand, so I was happy to be asked. The thing was, I'd need my big brother's permission if I was going to join any organization. I knew he'd tell me to do as I liked...but he was a person of importance now. I didn't know much about it, but I was fairly confident that rival factions were involved. If I entered the Magicians' Guild without thinking it through, I might end up joining a faction hostile to him, and then I'd be a burden for sure. I wanted to avoid that for various reasons, so I put off the decision. I played with ever-winsome Lucie and helped out around the house. Living like this might have made me restless once. *I'm useless compared to everyone else*, I'd have thought. *I need to do better*.

I'd be lying if I said I never got restless through those days of doing nothing. Not *nothing*, not really. I kept busy.

The house was empty now. Rudeus and his wives were away—even Aisha was gone. The children were there, though. The youngest was still a baby, and Lara had Leo looking after her—he never left her side. Lucie was a different story. She always seemed lonely. Elinalise occasionally came over with Clive, and then the two of them would play together, but when they went home she'd watch the front door from the second-floor window or sit in the closet hugging her knees to her chest and stifling tears. She was trying to be strong.

Is the job Rudeus is doing so difficult that this little girl has to be strong? I thought. Then again, when I was a baby, Dad had a difficult job too.

Some jobs were so urgent they had to be done right away, or things would just keep getting worse. Rudeus and the others must've been facing something very difficult. He cared about his family. There was no way he would want to make his daughter lonely. No one had told me the details, but I knew him.

All the same, I understood how Lucie felt. When my father didn't come home, I was lonely, too.

So whenever she looked lonely, I made an effort to play with her. We didn't do anything special, mind you. We went fishing, we went to look around the university, I read her books at the library, we went shopping in town, and we did the housework together. That was all. I myself didn't have any hobbies, so that limited our options for play. Lucie enjoyed herself anyway, and lately she'd started calling me "Sister Norn." She'd been especially happy when I made her a fishing rod of her very own and started pestering me every day to take her fishing. We went to the river outside the town because the fishing prospects were better there. I could in theory use a sword and magic, but I wasn't sure I'd be enough to protect her in a worst-case scenario. I'd have asked some younger students from the university who were adventurers for protection, but...they had better things to do, surely. I knew they'd toss everything else aside and come to help if I asked, though. And I'd pay them a retainer if they *did* come help. I just didn't want to be reliant on them.

I promised Lucie that we could go fishing outside the town once every ten days. It was all right as long as we didn't leave the town, so I got them to let us fish in the little pond within the University of Magic...but Lucie wasn't impressed with our fishing spot. Maybe because there was no chance of angling for a whopper here.

Anyway, today was our once-every-ten-days fishing day. I took Lucie to the river to fish, and she caught her biggest one yet. She beamed as she showed it off to the younger students on guard duty, brightening everyone's mood.

I got the message when we got home from fishing. I was just telling Lucie, “Next time, let’s go a little further upstream—” as I opened the door...and there was Cliff in our house. Cliff, who was supposed to be in Millis where he’d returned after graduation.

“What? Cliff?”

“Oh, Norn. You’re home too. It took me a little while to get here.”

“Huh? Um, yes...but...why are you...?”

“You haven’t heard?” Cliff said incredulously. “A plague is spreading through the Superd village. They say my assistance is required.”

I couldn’t believe it. My heart pounded. The Superd were in trouble, and Rudeus was calling on all the different countries to send healing magicians and doctors to save them. Cliff had persuaded the Holy Country of Millis to let him answer Rudeus’s call and was now hastening to join him. Cliff explained it all for me, but I’d glazed over in shock. I’d bet I missed half of it.

“Rudeus says that even if the Superd die out, that doesn’t mean we’ve lost the battle...but a person he owes a lot to is in danger.”

A person Rudeus owed a lot to. The gears in my mind started turning again.

“That person—what was their name?!”

“Hm? Oh, I think it was Ruijerd.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “In...in danger, you said? Ruijerd is in danger?”

“Wait, that’s right. I heard he helped you too, didn’t he?”

Ruijerd had the plague and was on the verge of death. My mind went totally blank. Memories of long ago flashed through the back of my mind: the time in Millis when Ruijerd gave me an apple, the time when he took me from Millis to Sharia, putting me on his knee and telling me all kinds of stories on the way... Ruijerd, who’d been kind to me while I’d cried and sniveled. Ruijerd, who never raised his voice, even when our journey was cut short...

“Do you want to come along? You might be able to help.”

“Yes! Of cou—” I was about to say *Of course I will*, but then I looked down and I saw another pair of eyes. They were anxious. Fearful.

Lucie looked away the second our eyes met, then ran from the room. I couldn’t chase after her. All I did was reach out, maybe in an unconscious effort to stop her. My hand only grasped at empty air, then fell to my side.

After a moment, I said, “No, I’ll stay here.”

“Oh. All right.” Cliff didn’t ask anything else. He didn’t tell me what I ought to do like he usually did. “I’m leaving tomorrow morning. If you change your mind, come to Orsted’s office then.”

He paid his regards to Lilia, then left the house. Apparently, he’d dropped by specially to say thank you for looking after Elinalise and Clive. I saw him off, then went to look for Lucie. I went up to the second floor and looked through each room in turn. Lucie turned up right away. I knew all too well the kinds of places children hid at times like this. She was in Sylphie’s room, curled up tight against the side of the bed and hugging her knees to her chest.

I sat down next to her without saying anything. I knew whatever I said, she wouldn’t want to hear it.

A few quiet minutes passed. Lilia came up just once to check on us, but when she saw us, she gave me an apologetic look and retreated. Lilia... didn’t really get children. She probably thought she wouldn’t be any help. Not that I’d say I understood much about other children besides myself...

I sat there, thinking this to myself, when Lucie mumbled, “Are you going away too, Sister Norn?” Her face was still buried in her knees. She sounded like she might cry.

“No, I’m staying here with you, Lucie,” I said. I meant it. Yes, after hearing Ruijerd was in danger, I’d wanted to rush to his side. I was furious at Rudeus. Why hadn’t he told me? At the same time, I was resigned; even if I went, there was nothing I could do. I accepted that had to be why Rudeus hadn’t told me. I ought to stay here and look after Lucie.

After going to school, I’d gotten a little more capable—at least, I was no worse than average—but I couldn’t help with a problem that had even bamboozled my brother. What I *could* do was be here for Lucie.

“Who’s Ruijerd?” Lucie asked.

“He’s a person who helped your daddy a lot.”

“What about you?”

“Huh?”

“When the man said *Ruijerd*, you made the same face as Daddy.”

The same face as my older brother? What kind of face was that?
Knowing Rudeus, it probably said *I have to go help right now*.

“That’s right. He helped your big sister Norn, too,” I told her. Lucie didn’t say anything.

“When I was about your age, Lucie, my dad—your grandad—he had to go away from your daddy.”

“From Daddy...?”

“Yes. And your big sister gets lonely easily, so she cried the whole time. But then Ruijerd came, and he was nice and he stroked her hair. He taught her games and told her old stories so that she wouldn’t be bored. He got her to stop crying.”

Lucie absorbed this in silence.

I went back through my old memories, telling her about the time I spent with Ruijerd. I told her how I met him in Millis, then our reunion, and the road from Millis to Sharia. Ruijerd was always kind to me. He was warm in a different way from my dad. The more I thought back, the more I wanted to go to him, but then I thought about how I’d go and find him suffering from the plague. There’d be nothing I could do. I wanted to cry.

“Ruijerd was, well...he was that sort of person,” I finished. I’d lost track of what I’d said about him as I spoke. I wasn’t sure if I’d managed to say it in a way that Lucie would understand. Maybe it hadn’t been a very interesting story. In the end, I’d just told it for my own sake. I looked at Lucie and she looked back at me. She’d stopped crying a while back, and her eyes were fierce.

“Lucie? What’s—”

“That’s like...” Lucie cut me off. “Like what Red Mama told me. She said protecting people is important. That’s why you’ve gotta be strong. So,

Sister Norn, I thought..." Just like a child, she tripped over her words and her train of thought was all jumbled. She stood up. "Sister Norn, when you're in trouble, I'll come save you. For sure."

"You will? Thank you," I said, making myself smile even though I wasn't sure how she'd gotten there after my story. "When you're in trouble, I'll come running too, Lucie."

"No!" she shouted.

All right, not that, then. I realized I'd interpreted what she was trying to tell me wrong. Lucie didn't want me to hold her hand. She was holding my hand. She was pulling on it to help me to stand up.

"Sister Norn, Ruijerd is yours," she said. I looked at her blankly. "You have to go to Ruijerd, Sister Norn."

At last, I realized what Lucie was trying to tell me. She was saying *Get out of here!* She was saying that if Ruijerd was in trouble, I had to go and help him—that if it were her, she'd go. She wouldn't turn her back on the person who'd comforted her when she was lonely.

"But Lucie, what about you?" I asked her. "Won't you be lonely?"

"I won't be lonely. You taught me all kinds of things. I can fish, and I can read books by myself."

She *would* be lonely, of course. I knew that. She was just saying she'd be strong. She was putting me first, repaying the debt she felt to me. This kid was still only little, but she'd been able to make that decision and tell me that.

"I'm gonna grow up like you, Sister Norn, so you've gotta go!" she insisted.

I didn't think I should go. *I should look after her. I shouldn't make her be strong anymore.* But...if I didn't go after this, Lucie wouldn't play with me anymore. She wouldn't boast to me about the fish she'd caught with a big smile like the one she'd worn today. I just had that feeling.

I stood up. Lucie went around behind me and pushed my bottom like she was telling me to get out of the house already.

"I got it. I'm going," I said.

“Okay!” Lucie didn’t look lonely anymore. She was inspired, and her face brimmed with pride.

That’s how I was driven out of the house. I was allowed to at least get ready, but I had next to nothing but the clothes on my back when I went to Cliff to ask him to take me with him. Cliff agreed without hesitation, and he helped me get my things together. We left Sharia with the morning sun, making for Orsted’s office. Cliff said that was where the teleportation circle was.

As I entered Orsted’s office, I turned to look back at the town. Morning was dawning on Sharia. It glowed in the sunlight. I’d seen a similar sight long ago when Ruijerd brought me there. Then I remembered what Lucie had said.

Sister Norn, Ruijerd is yours.

I’d managed to do for Lucie what Ruijerd had done for me back then, I realized. My eyes filled with tears.

“Norn, what are you doing? Let’s go,” Cliff said, hurrying me along.

“O-okay!” I replied and went into the office.

I promised myself I would go fishing with Lucie the moment I got home.

Interlude: Vita and Raxos

THE STICKIES were once called monsters.

In the depths of a forest on the Demon Continent, there lived a species of slime creatures. They infiltrated fruit and the carcasses of animals, then parasitized creatures that ate them, forging a symbiotic bond with their hosts. These creatures were the forerunners of what would one day become Stickies.

One day, one of the creatures was captured. The person who caught it did a range of experiments on it. They made it parasitize all kinds of creatures and absorb a variety of substances. The creature achieved sapience. Its captor was satisfied by this and released the creature back into the wild. It returned to its herd and shared its sapience with the other creatures. Thus, these formerly mindless parasites grew intelligent. Being smart didn't mean they were all that tough, though. They were recognized as demons because of their ability to communicate and enhance the healing and disease resistance of their hosts. They greatly aided the demon kings and their upper leadership in the Human-Demon War, parasitizing their bodies to lend their bountiful intelligence. In celebration of this achievement, one of the creatures was even gifted a Demon Eye by the Demon World's Great Emperor Kishirika and became a Demon King. Despite these achievements, they produced no heroic figures of the sort that history remembers...until the creature called Vita was born.

The Stickies were parasites. The strongest of them might survive to a degree without a host, but in general, they lived symbiotically with their hosts and died with them. They lent knowledge and advice to the creatures they parasitized, but they could not control them as they pleased. Taking over a body wasn't impossible, but it required the owner to spend years and years without resisting. Unless the host were brain dead, it wasn't possible to usurp a body's rightful owner.

Vita was different: He was a Blessed Child. From the moment he was born, he was special. Using illusions, he could show his hosts dreams. The

dreams he showed them could go on and on. He was able to put those hosts in years-long comas—a state of effective brain death. Vita was the first Sticky in history able to control his host. Yet he wasn't born with any great ambition. He wasn't even aware of his own power. The first time he discovered it was when, young and brimming with curiosity, he left the cave that was his home to go on an adventure and almost died.

He encountered his first “river” and, driven by curiosity, he jumped into it. The flow of the water broke up his mucus, leaving only his core. The mucus forming the bodies of the Stickies is a vital organ—their hands and feet, their mouth and stomach, and even the skin that protects them. A naked core entering the body of another creature, unable to protect itself from the creature's stomach acid, would simply die.

Unable to move and stripped of his protective mucus, Vita waited to die. He was washed all the way to the sea, where he found himself in the belly of a fish. As his awareness faded, Vita dreamed. In the dream, he met a god. With the god's advice, he learned how to restore his mucus from moisture. The god told him of his true power. Vita sent the fish nightmares to make it vomit him up, then generated mucus from seawater. Then, when another fish swallowed him, he took over its mind and body. He made that fish get itself eaten by a bigger fish, then that bigger fish get eaten by a bird, and then that bird get eaten by a demon king, whose body he stole.

He did all of this on the advice of the Man-God. The demon king whom Vita took control of was extremely powerful and had fought in the Laplace War.

Now I am almighty, Vita thought. Consumed by arrogance, he committed all manner of atrocities. He murdered and he stole, and he delighted in all of it. He hadn't thought destroying things would bring him such joy. Perhaps it was the influence of his host's nature.

Vita's reign of terror was to be short-lived. Someone came to stop him, and that someone was called Raxos.

Raxos was a servant of the tyrannical demon king Vita was possessing. The two had come through the Laplace War together as comrades. His strength was such that he'd earned the epithet “Death God.” He had been away on a long journey, but when he returned, he took one

look at the tyrannical demon king and said, “Who are you? What did you do with him?”

Vita introduced himself. “That fool of a demon king is dead,” he said. “I am Demon—No, I am Abyssal King Vita.”

Furious, Raxos challenged Vita to fight him. Vita thought it would be an easy victory, but Raxos defeated him before he realized what was happening. The bout was over in the blink of an eye. Just before his host died, Vita transferred his core to another host and fled.

Taking control of the new host gave Vita some respite. His new host wasn't a demon king, but they were still powerful. Besides, possessing a demon king had allowed him to learn about people and their societies. He had ideas of how to get himself a superior host. He'd put the past behind him and start fresh.

Vita was forgetting something: when he abandoned his hosts, they regained consciousness. The demon king, despite sustaining near-fatal wounds in the fight with Raxos, was no exception. Who knows what Raxos said to the demon king when he returned to himself? The demon king must have told Raxos of his humiliation, for Raxos came after Vita. Wherever he went, Raxos followed. No matter who he made his host, Raxos saw through them all and killed them. It wasn't until much later that Vita learned how Raxos had seen through his disguises. Raxos used a magical implement of his own design to detect creatures parasitized by the Stickies and kill them. As he continued, relentless and merciless, he came upon the cave of the Stickies where Vita was born. He massacred them.

This juggernaut struck fear into Vita. He'd created a monster. Despite his fear, however, he didn't simply run. He was convinced that killing Raxos was the only way he could survive, and so he plotted. Even Raxos would be rendered helpless if Vita could only get inside him and cast his illusions. Confident in his plan, he schemed to parasitize a friend Raxos had already used the magical implement on, use them to get close to Raxos, then transfer himself to Raxos. That plan never came to fruition. Raxos's friend was in possession of a certain magical implement—the Bone Ring. It was a ring Raxos had crafted from the bones of his friend, the tyrannical demon king, for the sole purpose of killing Vita. Vita nearly died. Fortunately for him, the friend was more lenient than Raxos.

“Raxos will kill me, but I was so happy seeing her again after all this time. Thank you,” he said, then let Vita go.

Vita took a nearby dog as his host, then left, nursing his failure. He decided he would flee. While possessing Vita’s friend, he’d learned just how fervently Raxos was pursuing him. He was convinced that Raxos would kill him, and he didn’t have a plan that could stop him. He fled to the place where the Man-God’s hints led him. He shed the dog for a Wyvern, then left the Demon Continent for the Divine Continent, heading for the Hell Labyrinth. It was an inhospitable spot—the kind of place where, no matter who you were, you didn’t come out once you’d entered. But Vita was a Sticky. None of that mattered to him. Inside the labyrinth, he went from one host to another until he finally parasitized the guardian of the labyrinth. At last, he found some safety.

A multitude of supermassive traps lay in wait within the Hell Labyrinth of the Divine Continent. It wasn’t the sort of place people simply walked into. Even Death God Raxos couldn’t make it all the way to the center. And Vita, terrified of Raxos, never planned on leaving. He could outwait Raxos.

After he made it to the guardian and took over its body, he let time slip away. Vita had all the time he wanted to look back and reflect on his life.

The Man-God told Vita that all of the Stickies apart from him and one other had been killed, laughing as he did so. “It’s your fault the Stickies all died,” he sneered, then snickered. Vita didn’t have any attachment to his own kind, but he was ashamed his own foolishness had brought about their demise. The old Vita would never have thought that way. Maybe it was thanks to the thoughtful nature of the monster that guarded the labyrinth. Whatever it was, Vita reflected on what the Man-God said and made up his mind to spend the rest of eternity in the labyrinth.

That resolution lasted until the Man-God called on him again.

“Hey, sorry for laughing at you the other day,” he said. Vita wasn’t bothered. On the contrary, he was happy to see him—the Man-God had

saved his life twice over.

“The truth is, I’m in a bit of a pickle and was hoping you’d help me out.” Vita hesitated at this. The Man-God had helped him, and now he was asking for Vita’s help. Vita knew it was only right that he agreed to do it. But he feared Raxos.

“Raxos is already dead. You’ll be fine,” the Man-God said, then told him just how humiliating and ugly the Death God’s end had been. Vita wasn’t concerned about the humiliation and ugliness, but knowing of Raxos’s death did reassure him. He decided to help the Man-God.

The problem was, he was the guardian of the labyrinth, so he couldn’t leave the boss room. And even if the guardian, who had hosted him all this time, were to die, Vita couldn’t go anywhere by himself.

He explained this to the Man-God, who said, “Don’t worry. I’ve called someone to come get you. He’s handling the plan for me, so make sure you listen to him, okay?” Then he vanished.

Before too long, a demon called Geese showed up. Vita could scarcely believe he’d made it to the bowels of the labyrinth, but when he saw the demon was riding a strangely familiar demon king, he accepted it. Vita put the guardian to sleep, then made it spit him out and climbed into a bottle Geese had brought.

“You’re Vita? Nice to meet ya,” Geese said. “Whoops, can you hear me okay in there?”

Geese explained the outline of the plan along the way. They would go to the Superd village, seize absolute control over the villagers, then lie in wait for a man called Rudeus. Rudeus would undoubtedly try to cure the plague, but they would use that to buy time. Just when Geese and his allies were about to invade, Vita would shift to Rudeus and incapacitate him. That was it.

Geese said one last thing, though. He came out with it suddenly, almost like Vita wasn’t there. “This plague, though. I dunno, ol’ Ruijerd saved my life back in the day. Coming back from the battle and finding all his people dead... S’all a bit much to bear.”

Vita thought about the Stickies, all dead because of him. He wasn't attached to them, but he remembered how he'd regretted them dying out. As he reflected, he decided that if he could ensure the plan succeeded while still curing the Superd, he'd do that.

Little did Vita know that Raxos's obsession would be the death of him.

Chapter 8: The Capital

THE HOUSE WAS QUIET. A simmering pot wobbled on the hearth at the center of the room. In front of it sat a man with green hair. Ruijerd. I sat opposite him with the hearth in between us. We didn't speak. Between Ruijerd and I, there was only silence.

We didn't need to speak. Or maybe it was more accurate to say we didn't have the luxury. Right now, my every thought was focused right in front of me. I couldn't screw this up. I waited for the moment to come, keeping a close eye on the hearth.

And then the moment came. I reached out slowly...and extinguished the hearth fire. It wasn't over yet. I couldn't rush this.

For ten minutes, I stayed where I was, unmoving. Then, when the time was up, I spoke at last.

"Ruijerd, have you prepared yourself?"

"I am ready," he said. With that, I reached for the object at my side. It was perfectly white and rough to the touch, shaped like an egg—no, not shaped like an egg. It *was* a chicken's egg.

Without a word, I cracked the egg into a bowl, then whisked it with my chopsticks. I did all this in one fluid series of motions, as though I'd been doing it all my life.

The child is father to the man, as the saying goes. You practice riding a bicycle until you can do it and then you never forget, no matter how many years pass. It's the same thing.

Except I'd never once practiced. I might have had this skill since birth. It was pure instinct.

The egg white and yolk were now combined.

I repeated the same process once more. Now there were two bowls of whisked egg. I set them to one side, then I reached for the pot lid.

I lifted the lid, looked inside, and nodded. "All right."

The white grains within were cooked through. There was a *hiss* as moisture escaped and the air in the room grew thick with the aroma of freshly steamed rice. I found myself gulping as my mouth began to water. The impulse to shovel the rice into my mouth then and there seized me, but I forced myself to resist—instead, I gently loosened the grains from the bottom of the pot. I took a bowl and heaped rice into it. It was precisely one bowlful. Too much or too little would end in disaster.

Next, I picked up my chopsticks and made a well in the middle of the rice. Into the well, I poured the freshly whisked egg. The white rice turned a sticky golden yellow. But I wasn't done.

It was what came next. *This* was the part of the process I'd so hungered for ever since I came to this world. I picked up the little bottle beside me. Gradually, I tipped the narrow, tapered spout over the golden rice. A dark liquid emerged. It was so pure black that you could have mistaken it for poison: soy sauce.

I poured it in a circular motion, once around. Twice would be fine too, but for now, once would do. Just that was enough to stain the surface of the golden rice black. It was the same color as custard with caramel sauce, which made my stomach growl.

Keep it cool, I told myself. *You can eat real soon*.

I steamed four cups of rice for this. From now on, I could eat this whenever I felt like it, any time I liked. I was going to make every moment of this first time special.

"It is ready," I announced at last, passing the bowl to Ruijerd. He accepted it with a noise of thanks, then waited for me. Right away, I went through the same motions to produce another bowl with the same contents.

"Thank you for the food," I said, bringing my hands together and bowing my head. I took the bowl in my left hand and my chopsticks in my right. I opened my mouth wide. I crammed in a heaping mouthful.

"Mm! Mmm!"

This taste. This was it. Perfection. There was room for improvement, but this was *it*. This was the flavor I'd been pursuing all this time.

“Mm...hm...hmmph!” I ate one mouthful, then another, then a third. No talking, just eating, chewing, swallowing, pausing occasionally to exhale, then inhaling another mouthful of rice with the next breath. I ate and ate.

Before I knew it, my bowl was empty. “Thank you for the meal,” I said. My moment of bliss was over in a blink. I was left feeling satisfied, but also wanting more. Before I dug into bowl number two, however, I looked over at the man opposite me. Ruijerd was still eating in silence. He was never the type to chat during meals, but he seemed even more taciturn than usual. Of course, he and I were the only ones here. I couldn’t expect a conversation when I wasn’t talking either. Wasn’t he eating slowly though? It looked like he was barely half done.

Okay, maybe *I* was too fast.

“Rudeus?”

“Agh!”

Norn was sitting right next to the hearth. I hadn’t noticed her.

“Norn, when did you get here?”

“Only just now. I did say something when you were eating, though...”

Ah, right.

“What is that?”

“A special dish. Want some?”

Norn glanced at Ruijerd before she answered. “I suppose.”

Right away, I scooped rice into a bowl, then whisked an egg, poured it over, and topped it with soy sauce. The whole process took less than ten seconds, but I could say with certainty there’d be no difference in flavor. This was *craftsmanship*.

“Eat up!” I prompted her.

“What even is this?”

“The food of my people.”

Norn hesitated for a long moment, then took the bowl with a “thank you” and started to eat.

I waited. I sat there and waited for the two of them to finish. *Still not done? Hurry up, I wanna hear what you think. If you don't have anything to say, that's fine too, but I wanna know.*

Ruijerd finished eating. “Is this the food you told me about during our travels?” he asked.

“Yeah. What did you think?”

“It was good.” That was all he had to say, but it was more than enough for me. In the good old days when we'd traveled together, this was what I'd hankered after. Now I was eating it together with my old traveling companion. My only regret was that Eris wasn't there with us.

“Thanks for that,” Norn said when she was finished. She'd only just started; she must have wolfed it down.

“Let's hear it then, Norn. This is what I told you about back home.”

“It was actually...quite good. This flavor, it's not like anything I've had before. Is it that seasoning?”

“That's right. Soy sauce is incredible. You can put it on anything and it'll taste great.”

“Wow...”

I got a rave review from Norn as well. I'd make it for her again at home. Today was a historic day. Today marked the birth of *tamago kake gohan* in this world.

“The only thing is,” I added, “eating raw egg can make you sick. I'll cast detoxification magic on you when you're done.”

“You can't feed something that needs detoxification to a person who's still recovering!” Norn exclaimed. On this historic day, I'd earned a scolding.

Two days passed. The Superd steadily moved toward recovery. Many were still bedridden, but those with mild symptoms were back to their normal lives. With that, I decided to build a darkroom in a corner of the

village and plant Sokas Grass. We still didn't know whether the plague was the result of the soil or Abyssal King Vita, but if they ever came down with the same symptoms, having this would make all the difference. If Abyssal King Vita *had* caused the plague, I supposed he was gone and there'd be no chance it'd recur. If it was the vegetables, the Superd would have to change their lifestyle, either by moving closer to the edge of the forest or by going to the Earthworm Ravine Village for their produce. One or the other. Whichever one it was, they'd need the blessing of the Biheiril Kingdom. Moving them to the Asura Kingdom was an option too, but many of the Superd were uneasy or outright opposed to the idea. They'd lived on this land a long time, and they were loath to leave it. Not to mention that the Millis faith had great influence in the Kingdom of Asura. The Superd might have eased up around Cliff, but their fear of the Millis Church ran deep.

And so, I set off to the capital city of Biheiril to negotiate with the Biheiril Kingdom. I had two objectives. First, acceptance of the Superd. Second, dissolution of the hunting party. The Superd were generally blunt in their interactions, and they'd faced ongoing persecution, so they were a little insular. They were good-hearted people, though. Even if the Biheiril Kingdom had reservations, I had all sorts of ways I could persuade them. The quickest would be to have someone come to the village. Once they saw the Superd for themselves, saw they were awkward but warm-hearted, saw the innocent children, they'd know they were harmless... At least, that's what I hoped. I couldn't count my chickens. The Biheiril Kingdom's inspectors might see children and think *They're breeding?! We must exterminate them at once!* as though they were cockroaches.

If it came to that, I'd just encourage the Superd Tribe to move. Settling them in the north of the Asura Kingdom would mean putting another burden on Ariel, but... If all else failed, I'd pay her with my body.

It'd be fine. Whatever else you thought, the Superd children were all sweet and beautiful. I didn't want to believe the Biheiril Kingdom was full of jerks who wouldn't even be moved by the sight of those children playing with their animal-hide ball, the picture of innocence.

"So," I concluded, "I'm going to the Biheiril Kingdom."

"I see."

“Cliff says he’s going to keep an eye on how things progress, and Elinalise will stay with him. I think Norn is going to keep caring for Ruijerd. What are you going to do, Sir Orsted?”

“I will remain here. Cliff Grimor is researching the plague. *Next time*, I may be able to cure it.” As he spoke, a ball came hurtling at him and he whacked it away. It happened in a flash. I barely saw his hand move. The ball flew back in a gentle arc right into the arms of the child.

“My presence shouldn’t be required for negotiations,” he continued.

“No arguments there. Even with the helmet holding the curse at bay —” Another ball came flying and *whack*, back it went again. “—that doesn’t mean it’s gone altogether, does it?”

“Indeed.” *Whack*. Back went the ball.

“Should it come down to it, though, I’d appreciate you making an appearance. Even with the curse, the sight of you should strike awe into them.”

“Very well.”

Whack, again.

“Should I make them cut it out?” I asked, looking in the direction of the incoming balls where a group of Superd children was hurling ball after ball at Orsted. They didn’t look hostile so much as curious. *Who’s the weird guy? Let’s hit him with the ball!* Something like that. Without the helmet, they might be hurling stones rather than balls...

“It’s of no concern. Such trifling shots don’t count as an attack.”

“You...you don’t say.” Was Orsted *playing*? There was no telling what his face was doing underneath the helmet, but he didn’t sound grumpy.

“Are you enjoying this?”

“It’s not so bad,” he admitted. *All right, then.*

“Great. I’ll be back soon.”

Orsted grunted his approval and I left. Dohga and Chandle were already waiting for me at the teleportation circle. While I was in the capital, Chandle was going to the second city to make contact with the informant. It wasn’t how we planned it, but we’d decided splitting into two groups would

be more efficient. Dohga was coming with me for protection. At this stage, I didn't see him being much help. I supposed it was better having him there than not.

"Oh!" On the way, I passed Ruijerd. He was shaky on his feet, leaning on Norn's shoulder for support. "Ruijerd, you can walk?"

"Short distances," he said. Judging by the stern look on Norn's face, he wasn't supposed to.

"I'm going to the Biheiril Kingdom for a little while to negotiate with them. When I come back, I might have some soldiers with me. If you could be as welcoming as possible, that'd be a real help."

"Very well. I'll let the chief know," Ruijerd said, but he was looking at Orsted. Orsted was backed up against a wall, with children throwing ball after ball at him. You'd be forgiven for thinking they were bullying him, but there was something charming about it. Orsted deflected each ball with precision—the children were laughing.

"Looks can be deceiving," Ruijerd remarked.

"They sure can," I said, the corners of my mouth quirking into a smile.

I passed through the magic circle at Orsted's office, then on to the Biheiril Kingdom. Naturally, when I stopped off at the office, I checked the communication tablets. Zanoba reported all was well. Aisha and the Mercenary Band said the same. There was still nothing from Sylphie, but that was all right. She was pretty far away, and wasn't supposed to be close to her nearest teleportation circle. Roxy had made some progress. She didn't know where the Ogre God was, but spurious rumors were circulating that the ogres were readying for battle over on Ogre Island. She also said that Eris was itching to come back to me. She wanted to see Ruijerd. I bet she did, but I needed her to hang on a little longer.

I also sent out messages to everyone to let them know the Superd were on the way to recovery. It'd all been solved in a few days. It made me

feel like I was bothering everyone by calling for all hands on deck and then quickly calling them off, but they'd have to deal with it. When that was done, I put on my disguise ring once more and hopped onto the teleportation circle that led to the capital of the Biheiril Kingdom.

Zanoba had set up the teleportation circle in an abandoned village in the forest, half a day's journey from the city.

The moment I arrived, Zanoba bowed and said, "I've been expecting you, Master!" Julie and Ginger were with him.

"You were waiting for me?" I asked.

"Indeed. I came at once when I received word you were coming."

How dutiful.

"This is perfect!" he continued. "Now I can tell you what's been happening without worrying about eavesdroppers."

"True that. All right, let's hear it."

"I must admit we haven't had much success," Zanoba confessed. He told me what they'd been up to. First, after arriving in the capital and securing lodgings, he set up the teleportation circle in this forest. Then he started collecting information in the capital, where he learned that the kingdom was putting together a hunting party—that was when he sent his initial report via contact tablet. I'd seen that one. After that, he learned that the North God had joined the hunting party. Now he was searching for news of Geese and doing reconnaissance to identify the North God. That about summed it up.

"So we know nothing," I summarized.

"My sincere apologies. I heard North God Kalman the Third was a conspicuous man, so I thought we'd find him straight away, but it hasn't been that simple..."

"No, don't apologize." We hadn't been in the Biheiril Kingdom for long. Zanoba's team had arrived in town, set up the magic circle, then gotten to work. It had only been a week. It was too soon to demand results.

"We're just getting started," I said. "Let's do this thing."

“All right,” Zanoba replied.

The North God joining the hunting party was interesting. If that were true, I’d love to get in touch with him. Only...a guy that conspicuous, and he was nowhere to be found? That made me suspect he was up to something. Maybe Geese had already recruited him. When Vita failed, Geese probably decided the plan had failed. He’d lost the advantage and retreated with the North God in tow. Or Vita might have been a diversion. He’d gone down easily.

The news about Vita might not have even gotten back to Geese yet, but that was probably overly optimistic. Either way, I’d still gotten Ruijerd on my side. That was enough to make coming to the Biheiril Kingdom worth it.

“Well then, Master, shall we be off? I’ll take you to the capital.”

“Yes, please.”

What I have to do hasn’t changed, I thought as we set off for Biheiril.

The capital of the Biheiril Kingdom kind of reminded me of the Shirone Kingdom. It had the ambience of a mid-sized nation on the Central Continent. This country had timber in abundance, and almost all the buildings were made of wood. Trees dotted the city. Maybe they were what provided its unique atmosphere. It was night when I arrived, which also gave it a particularly cozy, yet grand feeling. In this country, they lit great braziers in the street when it got dark.

Otherwise, nothing set it apart from any other town. We passed inns and hawkers near the entrance. As we approached the town center, it steadily grew more extravagant—merchant houses gave way to noble mansions. Right in the middle there was a castle. It was built at the meeting point of two rivers, similar to Fort Karon in Shirone and just like Sunomata Castle in Gifu. Behind the castle, on the other side of the river, were the slums. Just where they were in any other town.

“Right, we have to see the king.”

“Do you think we can get an audience?” Zanoba said. “The authority of Her Majesty Queen Ariel doesn’t extend to places like this...”

“Hmm.”

Zanoba and I strategized in a room we'd gotten at the inn. This wasn't the kind of place adventurers stayed; it was a swanky establishment that catered to nobles visiting from the provincial cities. I wasn't sure whether to remark on how differently wealthy people lived than the rest of us or to reprimand him for doing something that could draw attention. Not that it was so conspicuous that it'd wreck anything.

"What about slipping in with the hunting party? There'll be a departure ceremony where the king will make an address. You could force your way close to him; then you'll definitely get your audience."

"That'll be too late. If we try to call a time-out just when the kingdom's got everything ready and said, 'Go,' they might plow ahead anyway."

There was an order to these kinds of missions. You put the party together, you gathered food supplies and weapons, then off you went. If someone showed up at the last moment telling you to *hold on a minute!* there was a good chance you wouldn't stop. You couldn't—the kingdom's reputation would be tied up in pulling this off.

"It might be too late now, but I want to explain to him why there's no need to attack the Superd."

I'd tell the king about the existence of the Superd Tribe, get the kingdom to guarantee their safety, and then the hunting party could catch some Invisible Wolves or whatever and come home. I could even cover some percentage of whatever money they'd wasted on it. Orsted would fork out a decent amount if I asked.

That was why I wanted to meet the king as soon as possible before the hunting party set off. I conveyed this to Zanoba as I tried to think of a way to do it.

"Let's try going there directly first. It might draw unwanted attention, but I'll introduce myself as a follower of the Dragon God, then name-drop the Asura Kingdom and—if the situation calls for it—Perugius. If that doesn't work, we can think of something else."

No other great ideas came to me. We decided to ask for an audience like everyone else.

The next day, after breakfast, we set off for the area around the castle. It really did look like the one in Shirone, from the size to the vibe... The main difference was the number of wooden parts this castle used. That meant it was vulnerable to fire, not unlike Zanoba.

“We’ll probably get turned away at the door,” I said.

“I’m sure Queen Ariel’s name will at least get us a meeting.”

“The Asura Kingdom doesn’t have any diplomatic ties with this country... It’ll be tricky if we follow the proper procedures.”

“You’re not going to follow the proper procedures?”

“I *can’t* follow them.”

It was unexpectedly difficult to get a meeting with the king. I’d always skipped most of the steps to getting royal audiences in the past. Usually, you leveraged connections in the nobility to get an appointment, got an outfit and a carriage, and handed over documentation to prove who you were. Then you were sent to a palace official who made sure you were trustworthy. After *that*, they officially put it on the king’s schedule and you got to go to the audience chamber. That was the process. It was a tall order if you didn’t have the connections. That didn’t mean it was *impossible* to do a walk-in. If you were important enough that the king wanted to see you, even an applicant showing up out of the blue could get an audience. The only problem was that Geese would find us if we drew too much attention. That limited our options. Honestly, I could probably just assume I got identified ages ago, seeing as I’d taken out Vita.

“Okay, Zanoba. It’ll be no good if we go around together—people are bound to start talking. Dohga and I will take things from here.”

“May fortune smile on you in battle,” Zanoba said. We parted ways on a busy street, and I went with Dohga to a guardhouse near a canal. Despite the early hour, the soldiers were marching around busily. They weren’t going to arrest me as a suspicious person if I went up out of nowhere and asked for an interview, were they? I was dressed like a noble, at least, but there was no embassy in this country. I didn’t know what the proper attire was.

Hold up. It’s not a guardhouse. That looks like a reception desk.

“Excuse me, may I have a moment?”

“State your business.” A man with a magnificent handlebar mustache sat at the desk. He wore an official-looking tunic, so I guessed he wasn’t a soldier. I needed to compliment him on the whiskers, pronto—scratch that, he’d asked me about my business. I should tell him what I was here for.

“Well, you see, I was hoping to request an audience with His Majesty the king...”

“When?”

“Huh? I suppose today. As soon as possible if that’s all right...” I know, I’m one to talk, but this process seemed *super* sketchy.

Whatever. I had nothing to lose, so I might as well accept we were going to draw attention and go through the proper procedures.

The mustachioed man glanced at me, then rifled through a stack of papers. “One gold,” he said.

“Sorry?”

“For the audience. It’s one gold.” *A tip, I guess.*

“Here you are.”

“To be sure—eh?” The man stared intently at the coin I’d given him. Then he bit it. Was there a problem? A forgery and I hadn’t noticed?

“This is Asuran money, isn’t it?”

“Um, yes, as it happens, this is who I am,” I said, flashing the insignia Ariel sent me at him. He didn’t say anything. That wasn’t ideal. He was looking at me suspiciously now. The authority of the Asura Kingdom really didn’t extend to these parts, just like Zanoba said. This looked bad.

But then he put the gold coin into his pocket, went through his pile of papers and filled something in, then handed the sheet to me.

“Fill out your name and the purpose of your audience.”

“Um, okay.”

“Return here when the noon bell chimes.”

“Um. Okay. Thank you very much.” Despite the poor reaction, it looked like my tip had worked. He was passing my request along. Money

had gotten us past the first hurdle. It really did make the world go round!

Noon came and I stood in the waiting room for the audience chamber. I was nervous. I'd come to the palace thinking there was no chance we'd get an audience that day, but Whiskers from the reception desk had passed me over to another official. They'd led me here, and before I knew it, I was next in line. Soon they'd call me into the audience chamber. It was like I'd cleared level one only to find the final boss waiting for me. It was all happening too fast. My mind was blank.

Stop it. Pull yourself together, I told myself. The others waiting for their audience had told me some things. In this kingdom, the king would give audiences to anyone for the two hours after noon. There were some conditions on "anyone," of course. First, if you wanted an audience, you had to pay one Biheiril gold coin. A gold coin was about what a village could just scrape together all chipping in. Each person got fifteen minutes. Only eight people could go in per day. Anyone who could pay could get an audience with the king, offer their views, ask questions, and make requests—it was the policy in this country to let anyone who had a problem to come and make their petition. The fee kept people from coming in with trivialities. I supposed the system was fair. Biheiril Kingdom wasn't a half-bad country. Of course, there were probably real problems in places that couldn't afford a gold coin, too. On the other hand, if you could petition the king directly, every guy off the street would be here. Sordid merchants who never got to hobnob with the king and the city's wealthy would bring in their petty grievances and seek personal gain. In any case, when we showed up, the king was already fully booked. Ain't that always the way? Luck was on our side, however, and someone had canceled. A real break for us. I bet that Asuran gold coin, worth ten times as much as a Biheiril gold coin, hadn't hurt. People can't resist gold. Anyway, however this had happened, things were looking up for us.

The audience was fifteen minutes long. Not much time. There was no need to panic, though. I only had two requests. If I revealed my identity and made my case brightly and briskly, the future would brighten up to match!

"Master Rudeus? Please proceed to the audience chamber."

"I'll be back," I told Dohga.

“...Uh-huh,” he grunted. I took a deep breath, then stood up and went down the corridor that led to the audience chamber. The chamber itself... I guess I’d give it a C. It wasn’t all that spacious, the carpet was drab, and the eight soldiers standing around looked like they were bored. There weren’t any ornaments either. Not a regal place. When you considered that commoners came in here every day, however, maybe it was just right. I couldn’t fault it on practicality. Three stars.

I entered the audience chamber, proceeded to the right spot, then knelt and lowered my head. “It’s an honor, Your Majesty,” I said.

After a while, the king addressed me. “I see you are a man of gentility. Rise, and state for me your name and your purpose in coming here.”

I did as he said and looked up. The king was an elderly man. He looked worn out, like he wasn’t long for this world. If you told me he was ill, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

“My name is Rudeus Greyrat, follower of Dragon God Orsted, the second of the Seven Great Powers.”

“Ooh, the Dragon God, you say!” The king was unable to conceal his surprise. A positive reaction. That was a rarity. I guess this king knew who the Great Powers were. Maybe that was thanks to their connection to the ogres.

“What business does an associate of the Seven Great Powers have with us...nay, with this kingdom?”

“Well, Your Majesty, I have heard you plan to hunt devils in the Forest of No Return. I am here to request that you call it off.”

“Call it off?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Why would you ask that?”

“Because the people in the forest are not devils,” I said. Then I told him about the Superd Tribe. They had lived in the forest since long ago, maybe even before the Biheiril Kingdom came into being. They were not the race commonly believed to be devils. In the distant past, the Superd made a contract with a nearby village to hunt the invisible monsters and

keep the area safe from harm. Recently all the Superd had contracted a plague, which meant the invisible monsters hadn't been kept in check. Thanks to the efforts of Dragon God Orsted, they had recovered from the plague and returned to hunting the monsters like before.

I kept my explanation brief but made sure to highlight what a good people the Superd were.

"A race of devils, and now invisible monsters too..." the king murmured. "Your tale is a hard one to believe."

"I thought you might say so, Your Majesty, and so I came with a proposal. The only way to understand it is to see it with your own eyes. Would you consider sending someone, one of your people, to see the village for themselves?" I'd show them the secret life of the Superd—the womenfolk around the cooking pot, the men who made their livelihoods hunting the invisible monsters, the children who entertained themselves by throwing balls at the Dragon God...

"Hmmm..." The king stroked his chin, considering. But then he slowly shook his head. "Even if what you say is true, I cannot call off the hunting party at this hour. Many brave souls from throughout the land have already assembled here."

"If Your Majesty would only convey to them that the 'People of the Forest' who dwell beyond the Earthwyrms Ravine are *not* devils, so that the hunting party doesn't attack, that would be enough. The invisible monsters do exist—I humbly suggest they could hunt those instead. We are prepared to compensate you, if gold is a concern."

"Hmmm."

I took another breath. "Since time immemorial, the Superd have kept this country safe in secret. Even now, they are not asking for special treatment. They only wish to be left to themselves in a forest in a corner of your kingdom, where they burden no one... If Your Majesty refuses them even that, if you don't want them in your kingdom, then I will make arrangements for their relocation myself."

"You are a staunch ally to these Superd," the king said after a weighty pause.

“They saved my life when I was very young,” I replied. The king stroked his chin. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed an official looking at the time. *My fifteen minutes must be almost up. Crap. That went faster than I’d thought.*

“Your time is up. Please make your way out of the audience chamber.”

“I beg you to consider my request, Your Majesty! I promise your kingdom will not regret it!” I took another breath, then stepped forward and bowed.

“Galixon, Sandor!” called the king. Two soldiers stepped forward. One had a handlebar mustache, the other a long face like a horse. I was about to get thrown out on my ass. I thought I’d talked well, but apparently it’d been too much too fast after all. I’d screwed up this time. Next time—
“Go with this man and confirm the truth of what he says!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

I goggled at the king. “Y-you’re sure, Your Majesty?!”

“I am sending with you these soldiers. Know that if you have lied to me, I shall see off the hunting party on the decided day personally.”

Okay, I panicked there for a second, but he was actually sending soldiers to go with me. He wasn’t rejecting me out of hand. He was going to make his decision after confirming the facts. I liked this king. Maybe listening to petitions day in and day out had made him amenable to suggestions. The credibility of the Biheiril Kingdom in the eyes of the Orsted Corporation had just shot up. *Good job!*

“Thank you for your understanding, Your Majesty,” I said. Before I left, I bowed once more.

Chapter 9:

Four-Day Educational Superd Village Tour

I WENT BACK to the Superd village with the two knights in tow.

Traveling with them meant I couldn't use the teleportation circle, so we took the day-long journey back to Irelil by carriage. We stayed in Irelil overnight. I wanted to pick up Chandle on the way, but he said he still hadn't tracked down our informant, so we just exchanged progress reports. Disappointed that Geese had evaded us for this long, I hurried on. After another day, we reached the Earthwyrn Ravine Village. Like last time, it was full of people. The old woman was berating the mercenaries with gusto. That was what you'd expect, given that not even ten days had gone by since I was last there. I wanted to reassure Grandma that it was all right and the People of the Forest were safe, but it was still a bit soon for that. There'd be time after the hunting party was disbanded. We stayed in the village, then entered the forest the next morning.

"It's about far enough that we should be there by sundown if we set out in the morning. I ask a little more of your patience."

"Lead the way. I don't want to dawdle."

"My feet hurt."

My two soldiers tended to moan. First, there was Galixon: he had a magnificent handlebar mustache and looked a lot like the official at the reception desk. They might have been brothers. His tone and the way he talked were totally different, though. Unlike Whiskers from reception, Galixon was much blunter and came across as a bit rough. He was also impatient. I was going to pay for their board at the inn, but before I could get a word in, he'd paid for everything including my share. On the road, the moment he saw it was time to get a fire going, he was already gathering firewood. There was also the time we were attacked by monsters. He actually tried to take the lead in the fight. I was the one who dealt with the monsters in the end, of course. I couldn't have him getting hurt.

As for Sandor, he was of the long-faced variety—horse-faced, if you felt mean. Unlike Nokopara, wherever he was, he wasn't actually a horse.

Compared to Galixon, he was more laid-back. He always wore a dopey smile and didn't even draw his sword when the monsters showed up. He wasn't much of a talker, either—when it wasn't necessary for him to speak, he clammed up. Funnily enough, though, he was curious about everything. Once he found out I could use non-vocalized magic, he asked me a stream of amazed questions. He was dressed like a soldier, but maybe he was a magician.

I sometimes caught Sandor giving me significant stares like he was evaluating me. It made me feel like I was under observation, but I couldn't do anything about that. I was the guy who'd shown up out of the blue urging them to call off the hunting party. He probably had orders to keep a close eye on me in case I did anything suspicious. It was only natural for him to be on his guard. It was literally their job to observe me. Even so, for some reason, it gave me the creeps. They barely looked at Dohga, oddly enough. Despite his appearance, he was an innocent kid and I didn't think he had the brains to fool anyone or anything. Maybe they'd worked that out and that was why they weren't on guard.

On the road, I ran a positive information campaign for the Superd aimed at Galixon and Sandor.

“The Superd Tribe are good people. They're a little blunt, but so long as you meet them rationally, they will answer in good faith. They're also kind to their children, by the way.”

“We aren't children.”

“Yes, of course, but don't worry. They'll be welcoming to you.”

Unfortunately, they were skeptical about the Superd. If they showed up like this, it wouldn't matter if the Superd welcomed them—they'd suspect the very food put in front of their faces. Not to mention there'd been a plague in the village until recently. They might hesitate to eat the food. But, happily, the Superd had the medical team's food provisions now. All that stuff was produced in the Kingdom of Asura, so it should be delicious. Anyway, I wanted them to see the sights of the Superd village. We'd have a good time together.

We arrived at the Earthworm Ravine. Before us were two bridges.

“Why are there two bridges?”

One had been there originally. The other was the one I’d built.

“I didn’t want the old bridge to collapse when I was halfway across, so I used earth magic to build a new one.”

“Huh. Which one do we cross?”

“This one,” I said, pointing at my bridge. Right away, Galixon jumped on and set off across. Despite the height and the lack of a handrail, he marched on without hesitation. Wasn’t he scared? *Guess not*. I followed him with Sandor behind me and Dohga in the rear.

“Please don’t collapse,” I said under my breath. If I’d crossed first and the bridge had begun to collapse, I could have saved myself, but Galixon *insisted* on being the first. He was just like Eris. Maybe Galixon was a Sword God Style fighter too.

“Um, there are Earth Dragons down there...” Sandor said. I turned and saw him clearing his throat, looking below us.

“You hail from this country, right, Sandor? Didn’t you know?”

“I knew, but this is my first time coming here.”

Fair enough. People who’d seen all the famous sights in their home countries were few and far between, and this was *not* a tourist destination. He was a soldier, so he wasn’t about to go into a forest everyone was forbidden from entering.

Take Red Wyrn Mountain Range in the Asura Kingdom. Next to no one had climbed that set of peaks. It was the same thing.

“Master Rudeus, you introduced yourself as a follower of Dragon God Orsted...” Sandor began. “But have you ever *fought* an Earth Dragon?”

“I haven’t.”

“You did some spectacular magic on the road. If you fought one, do you think you could win?” His voice was shaking. Maybe he was afraid an Earth Dragon would climb up the ravine and attack us. We couldn’t see the floor of the ravine. That made your imagination run out of control, picturing what might be lurking down there...and what might come flying out.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. “I can’t make any promises if we fall into the middle of a swarm, but I can take one or two of them.”

“One or two...” Sandor repeated. “All right...” He didn’t sound reassured.

“Hey! Move it!” Galixon shouted. While we were talking, he’d already reached the other side and was waiting for us. I picked up my pace to catch up with our hasty companion.

“Once we’re across the bridge, we’ll be practically on top of the Superd village.”

Then the real task would begin.

Welcome to the Superd Village Educational Tour, guided by Rudeus Greyrat and his assistant, Dohga! There were only two tourists.

“The Superd village has a single entrance, with two guards keeping watch to stop monsters getting inside. The Superd have a unique sensory organ, and thanks to that they never miss an intruder. They are already aware of our approach, but you have nothing to worry about. They’re a very friendly race.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Galixon asked suspiciously.

“I’m explaining,” I replied. There was a lot you couldn’t understand just by looking, so I had to explain everything they wouldn’t pick up on. *That’s why your guide is here. That’s what the presentation is for.*

“We can see the entrance now. Do you see them? Those are Superd. See how their faces are pointing this way even though we’re still inside the forest?”

I pointed towards the village and the two soldiers stiffened. They were Superd, really and truly.

“Their hair *is* green.”

“That’s right. But there’s nothing to be afraid of. You get along just fine with the ogres, with their red skin and horns. Superd hair is a little

different, that's all. On the inside, they're just like you...although, as with any types of people, there will be some cultural differences. If you're friendly, they'll like you. If you're hostile, you'll put them off. They're just like us. Look, please."

As I spoke, one of the guards came up to us. First off, I needed them to understand that Superd weren't devils. Say hello with a smile and get a smile back. That was the first step in good human relations. I raised a hand and greeted the guard.

"Jambo!"

The guard stared at me doubtfully, hand half raised. He turned to look at his companion. Oops. Got a bit carried away there.

"Excuse me. I'm here with envoys from the Biheiril Kingdom. I want to show them around the village. Would you mind letting us pass?"

"Go ahead. Ruijerd told us about this."

"Thank you very much. I'd also like to talk to the chief, if we can."

"Very well. I'll pass it along."

One of the young guards set off running into the village. We saw him off, then I said, "Follow me."

Galixon and Sandor entered the village slowly behind me, their faces tight. They were nervous. To stop them from fretting, I slowed my pace.

"There was a plague going around here until just the other day, but humans can't catch it."

I didn't know that for a fact. Sokas Tea seemed to cure it, but I didn't even know whether the cause was Vita or the plague. Maybe I was already infected, and a month from now the Biheiril Kingdom would be plunged into a pandemic... I'd still choose the survival of the Superd over the risk of infecting humans I didn't know.

"They're getting food ready over there. Guess they're making dinner, considering the time. That place there is where they grow vegetables. Over on the other side, they're butchering the spoils of the hunt. See the carcass? It's visible now, but that's an invisible monster. They didn't attack us on the way here, but they're in the forest. The Invisible Wolves become visible

after they've been dead for a little while. Just as the name implies, they're wolves, and they're invisible. Only the Superd can hunt them well."

The chief and the others would need to get ready, so I took them on a quick look around the village, explaining as we went. None of the Superd came near us. I wasn't about to approach them carelessly either. With how standoffish they were being, I had to wonder if it wouldn't have a negative effect on the soldiers' mental image of them.

I was worrying too much. All they were seeing were the idyllic scenes you'd find in any village anywhere. It was okay. We were all okay.

"There's a Millis Church man over there."

"And an elf."

I looked over and saw Cliff and Elinalise talking about something. They were walking and pointing at a bundle of papers. Probably still hunting for the cause of the disease.

"Yes, he's the key architect of the Superd's recovery from their sickness."

"Does the Millis faith recognize the Superd then?"

"Not the entirety of the Millis faith, but some of its factions are accepting of demons. I can at least reassure you that the Millis Church isn't going to dispatch an army to the Biheiril Kingdom just because you shelter the Superd."

The two soldiers didn't reply.

"Shall I introduce you?" I suggested.

"No, that's fine." I raised a hand in greeting to Cliff. He nodded at me and crossed his arms. The sight of him living peacefully in the Superd village would confirm that the Superd weren't a danger.

Cliff looked severe as he eyed Galixon and Sandor. I needed another play.

"Oh, look over there! There are Superd children coming this way."

The children ran past us, holding balls and laughing amongst themselves.

“Aren’t their tails adorable? All Superd have them. They eventually turn into the white spears they carry. Children are sweet and innocent no matter where you come from,” I said, following the children with my eyes. “Don’t you think?”

The soldiers didn’t turn to watch them. Did they hate children? That wasn’t it. They were looking in the direction the children had come from. There stood an unsettling figure in a white coat and a black helmet.

Galixon gasped and his hand went to his sword. I quickly put myself in front of him.

“Uhhh, that’s not a Superd. Just ignore him!”

“Then who is he?”

“That’s my boss, Dragon God Orsted. I know he looks a bit unsettling like that, but he’s all right. He’ll leave your kingdom once this wraps up. He’s harmless and he won’t linger here. Please, rest assured of that.”

“I see,” Galixon said, after a pause that lasted way too long.

Orsted looked at them for a few seconds, then turned and walked away. As he left, the soldiers’ tension dissipated. Orsted’s curse had the effect of turning tense situations sour. On the other hand, after seeing Orsted, it should be all the clearer that the Superd were no more than ordinary villagers.

“There are many warriors amongst the Superd, but as you can see, more than half of them are harmless women and children. Please, set aside your preconceptions and look at them without prejudice. Do they look like devils to you?”

I asked them just after they’d gotten a look at Orsted. I was blatantly implying how much more devilish Orsted looked. I’d apologize to him afterwards.

“They don’t,” Sandor said in the silence that followed. “Setting aside, uh, Mister Dragon God? The village itself seems like any other normal village.”

“Yeah. It looks like my hometown,” Galixon agreed. Whether Orsted had been effective or not, Galixon and Sandor’s impressions weren’t bad so

far.

I noticed the young guard from earlier coming towards us. “The chief will see you,” he said.

“Thank you. If the two of you would please follow me, I’ll introduce you to the chief.”

The chief was ready to see us. Feeling that this was a good sign, I guided the two soldiers to where the chief awaited us.

The chief waited in a large-ish house. With the hall still being used as a medical center, he’d had to make temporary arrangements. There were three total waiting for us: two of the four who’d been there at my meeting with the chief, plus Ruijerd. The other two elders were still recuperating.

Norn stood beside Ruijerd, and as we went inside, she brought us tea she’d steeped in advance. My little sister was so considerate, if I do say so myself. She wouldn’t have had the mind to do this sort of thing before. I supposed these were the fruits of a formal education.

“Well, Master Rudeus? What shall we talk about?”

“The history of the Superd, your current situation, and your request to the kingdom.”

“Very well.”

After the modest welcome, the meeting went relatively amicably. The Superd chief spoke and the soldiers heard of the Superd Tribe’s past, present, and future, and their small wish to live in peace doing no harm to anyone. As time passed, the soldiers eased up as well. The village was tranquil and the chief’s manner was gentle. Even Ruijerd was doing his best to let down his guard.

“Very well. We will relay all this to his Majesty, just as we heard it,” Sandor said. “Fear not, we will not let you down.” With that, the meeting came to a close.

The soldiers stayed the night in the village. They would set off home the following day. I set them up in the house we’d been lent for Chandle and Dohga. Dohga and I were going to stay there too.

Norn had been staying with Ruijerd the whole time. She was practically attached to his hip; it was like she was chasing after some reminder of Paul.

“How did you find the Superd village?” I asked them before we went to bed.

“It was a more fruitful journey than I expected,” Galixon said, and Sandor agreed. They both looked happy.

“I always heard that the Superd were devils. But it’s different when you see it with your own eyes, isn’t it?”

“It’s a regular village. With great grub.”

“I’m still not convinced about these monsters you can’t see, though. Invisible Wolves, wasn’t it?”

“But the forest was weirdly quiet. Even quieter than the forest near the capital I go into regularly to hunt.”

“I guess it’s true that they’re hunting the invisible monsters then, huh?”

The two of them went on finding this and that to praise about the village until bedtime. Looked like the Superd Village Educational Tour had been a resounding success.

The next day, we decided that I’d see the soldiers back to the capital. I told them that if we stayed two or three days they’d get to see a real Invisible Wolf, but they said they had to get back right away to tell the king and get the hunting party disbanded. We set off at once. It’d really been a whirlwind trip. I really wanted to let them use the teleportation circle, but I restrained myself. Haste makes waste, as the saying goes. If I slipped up here, it’d be mortifying.

I went to tell Ruijerd that I was accompanying them back, then left the village.

The Superd should be all right now. Time to move on to Geese. I wanted to know where the North God and the Ogre God were, too. Chandle's information gathering seemed to have stalled for the time being, and they might have already fled this country for somewhere else... That could mean Sylphie was in danger. The "somewhere else" could be the Sword Sanctum.

I wondered how Sylphie was doing. I hoped she'd safely made contact with Nina. And how was Eris? I hoped she hadn't caused any trouble. She was probably all right so long as Roxy was with her, but Roxy slipped up herself sometimes. I couldn't shake all my worry. As for Aisha and her group... They'd be okay, somehow or other.

"Are you going to return alone?" Galixon asked.

"Huh?" I was walking along, lost in thought, when he turned back and asked me.

I looked around us. Galixon, Sandor, and me.

"That knight? He was fast asleep when we set out. Not even snoring," Sandor said, and I realized that Dohga wasn't with us. I hadn't noticed at all. The guy was huge, but he had no presence. More to the point, he'd *slept in?*

"Oh, well," I said breezily, "Please, don't worry. I'll be able to protect you just fine, even alone."

The other two exchanged a look. They didn't seem convinced. Not to worry, that wasn't a problem. If it came down to a fight, Dohga's presence wasn't going to make a difference.

I *had* also been told not to be alone, mind you. I could have these two wait for me in an Earth Fortress while I went and got Dohga, but we were going to meet up with Chandle in the Second City of Irel...

I realized the forest had opened into a clearing. We'd reached the Earthwyrms Ravine. In front of us were two bridges. *Perfect.* Across the bridge there were hardly any Invisible Wolves, so it was relatively safe. They could wait for me once we were across to the other side.

"I'll go first," Galixon said like this was the natural order. Sandor and I followed him. *Maybe I should have taken the rear to make sure they don't*

fall, I thought. I kept on alert, so I'd be ready whenever either of them fell.

Suddenly, Galixon stopped.

"What's wrong?" I asked. Galixon turned back. His face was blank. It didn't suit his magnificent mustache.

"You gonna do it?" The question was directed at Sandor. I turned and saw him shrug.

"He's all yours. Go ahead."

Sorry? What are they talking about?

"Guys, if you have something to discuss, can it wait until we're across the bridge?" I suggested.

"Eh?" Galixon exhaled with something a bit like a sigh, then moved his right hand to his left wrist. While I wondered what was going on, he hooked his finger into his gauntlet and slowly pulled off his glove. "I thought you'd notice," he remarked.

My heart was hammering in my chest. There on his finger was a ring. A ring I recognized.

"When I saw Cliff Grimor with that Eye of Identification, I had my heart in my mouth! Without the gloves, he'd have got us." Turning, I saw Sandor had taken his glove off as well. He wore the same ring. The ring I recognized because it was the same as the ring on *my* finger. The magical implement from the Asura Kingdom that changed your face.

Galixon exhaled deeply. "Those stupid theatrics. My shoulders are all knotted up," he said, then took the ring off. Before my eyes, his face began to change. His mustache vanished and was replaced with the face of a middle-aged man in his forties. A face like a hungry wolf that suited his way of speaking. He was an entirely different person.

"I have a message from Geese: 'Don't assume any magic item's the only one'," said Sandor. I turned back to him and found his face changed as well. He wasn't horse-faced any more. He was now a kid with black hair and a face still round with the last traces of puppy fat. "I have to say, I'm disappointed. I had such high hopes after you defeated Auber..."

I was speechless. My mouth was dry. Both Galixon and Sandor looked at me with murderous hostility.

“Geese said, ‘If ya get Boss into a tight place with bad footing, all his tricks will fizzle.’ I didn’t expect you to wander in so obligingly, and to let yourself be flanked...”

“Who...who *are you?*” I croaked. I don’t know whether I’d guessed it then or not.

“Gall Falion, Sword God fighter.”

“I am North God Kalman the Third, Alexander Rybak.” They both spoke at once. The former Sword God, Gall Falion, and the North God Kalman the Third. They had used Geese’s name. They were enemies. These two were *my* enemies.

The moment I was sure of that, I reached for my waist and pressed the button to release the scroll for the Magic Armor Version One.

But my arm didn’t move.

I watched as my right arm fell before my eyes, hit the bridge, then plunged down into the ravine. Galixon—Gall Falion, I mean—had his sword drawn. *He cut my arm off*, I realized, way too late.

“Aaagggghhh!” At last, a wave of excruciating pain raced through me. I tried to cover the stump of my right arm...my left arm wouldn’t move either.

No, not “wouldn’t move.” It wasn’t *there*. Gone. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my left arm fall into the ravine.

“So that’s your face, eh? Not too shabby. Way prettier than that mug you had on before.”

Gall looked at my face and laughed. When my arm fell, the ring must have stopped working.

“‘Boss casts magic from his hands. Cut ’em off and you might just be able to scuttle him,’” Sandor added. Blood poured from the stumps of both my arms. He was right. I couldn’t use magic. As though the circuits that fired my magic had been in those arms, it wouldn’t come out.

“We could have beaten him without all this, couldn’t we?”

“Nah, there’s no telling what might happen when you fight fair and square. Geese was being real cautious.”

“I don’t think so. When he had that bodyguard, Dohga, that was one thing. I doubt I’d lose to him alone.”

My magic wouldn’t come out of my arms. When I realized that, I started sending magical energy into the Magic Armor.

“Whoop—”

I upped the output of the leg segments, then turned. Facing Sandor, I launched. I wasn’t attacking. I was aiming past him, to slip past, and back to the Superd village—

“—sie!”

Something hit me in the back. It was a sword, I knew that. A slash that cut through the Magic Armor like butter. The Sword of Light. My torso was split in two...or was it? I’d thought it was, but then feeling an impact on my back didn’t make much sense.

Suddenly, I felt weightless. I was falling.

My vision was spinning, but I could make out Gall and Alexander looking down over the edge of the crumbling bridge at me. *Ahh, I thought, I kicked down with the full force of the upgraded Version Two and punched right through the bridge.*

I continued to fall. With both my arms gone and nothing I could do, I continued to fall. All the power had left my body. Fear rose in its place. I’d be dead in a moment.

Just as I surrendered to my inevitable death, something hit my body hard and I blacked out.

Gall Falion looked down into the ravine Rudeus had just tumbled into and sighed. “He *fell*?”

Alexander peered into the ravine as well, his brows furrowed dubiously. “Did you hold back at the end there, Gall? Looked almost like you didn’t cut through him.”

“Like hell... It’s this.” He held up his sword. It was snapped off at the hilt. As anyone who knew their stuff could tell, the sword was cast steel, one of those distributed to regular Biheiril soldiers. It wasn’t junk, but it wasn’t a sword made to last.

“That bastard’s armor was a whole lot harder than I thought...”

Be that as it may, Gall Falion was a master of the blade, and a craftsman never blamed his tools. There was no need to use a famous blade to cut up a flesh-and-blood opponent. The cast sword should’ve been more than enough, but Rudeus’s armor had been more resilient than he’d accounted for. He’d met stronger resistance than he’d ever encountered before when he slashed Rudeus across the back.

“Should’ve brought my own sword,” Gall muttered as he threw the sword into the ravine.

“Don’t beat yourself up about it,” Alexander said, shrugging. He continued to stare down into the ravine. “If we’d had our own swords, our identities would have been exposed.” He also had a regular-issue Biheiril sword on his belt. It was, without question, not a fit blade for the North God.

“Well, what now? Do we go down there and finish the job?”

Alexander *hmm*ed indecisively. “After he lost his arms, he couldn’t use magic. So long as that wasn’t an act, I think we’re in the clear.”

“And it’s crawling with Earth Dragons down there.”

“He said himself he could take one or two, but definitely not a swarm,” Alexander said conclusively. He also couldn’t be bothered climbing all the way down the ravine just to check Rudeus was dead. Killing Rudeus had never been the goal.

“Right, that’s our biggest obstacle out of the way. We heading back now?”

“I can’t wait for the fight with Orsted,” Alexander sighed. “Hey, I let you have Rudeus, so you’ll let me have Orsted, right?”

The two of them would go back across the crumbling bridge. Shooting the breeze like nothing of importance had happened, they would go back to the road that led to the capital of the Biheiril Kingdom.

“Eh? You just wanna move up the rankings in the Seven Great Powers. What’s it matter if I go first?”

“You’re wrong. I don’t want a higher ranking. What I *want* is to be a hero. I want to be a greater hero than my father was—a greater North God than he was.”

“Hah,” Gall scoffed.

No one followed them. No one was watching this place, not even a Superd with their third eye. In the aftermath of the chaos caused by the plague, their hunting parties weren’t venturing far from the village. If someone *had* been watching, the two men wouldn’t have launched their attack on the bridge.

“No skipping your turn. Come on, let’s stick to the plan. That was one of the conditions.”

Gall hissed through his teeth. “It’s too damn slow. And after Vita jumped the gun, who gives a rat’s ass about the plan anymore?”

With that, Gall Falion and Alexander Rybak melted away into the trees.

The ravine was empty. Only the crumbling bridge remained. Only the bridge and the silence.

Chapter 10: Disappearance

IN THE MAGIC CITY of Sharia, in an office on the outskirts of the city, a young elf woman was copying words written on a contact tablet onto paper. Her name was Fariastia—Fari or Tia to her friends. A certain executive at the company *still* couldn't remember her name.

Unbeknownst to Rudeus, Fariastia was the real name of Little Miss Elf, the receptionist. She was in charge while the CEO was out of the office.

“Right, from Sylphiette... *Nina is pregnant, so she won't be able to support us. I'm heading to the Biheiril Kingdom now.* I guess I should forward this?”

Her job was to take all the information that everyone sent in and copy it out on paper for Rudeus and Orsted when they came back. When the message was urgent, however, she was permitted to use her own discretion to forward it to another tablet. The thing was, these communications were full of words like *god* and *king*, so it was hard for an ordinary, middle-class girl to decide what was important.

“Okay, let's forward it.”

It was Aisha who'd picked her for the job. Aisha had hired her based on stringent criteria through a rigorous selection process. You might think anyone could do Orsted's paperwork, but her position handled large volumes of information that couldn't be allowed to leak.

Faria had been born in the capital of the Kingdom of Ranoa. Her father was an elf who'd been a roaming adventurer. Her mother was a human, the daughter of wealthy merchants. She was the youngest of three siblings. Because she was a girl, she wasn't taught how to be a merchant, and so she'd never aspired to it—however, running around a merchant house since infancy meant she'd grown up watching crafty merchants. That background would come in handy later on. When she started at the University of Magic, she took a class taught by an intelligence agent on a whim and got excellent grades. That was the feature that caught Aisha's

sharp eyes. There were others more skilled in handling information, but she was Orsted's pick. In Orsted's estimation, the chances of her becoming their enemy were low.

"First I'll send this to the Superd village... Who else, after that...? Oh, Eris. Eris might be happy to hear that Nina's pregnant?" she muttered to herself as she sat in a corner of the CEO's office, contact tablet in front of her. She toiled over it, magic crystal in hand, sending messages off to the Superd village, the Third City, and Ireilil.

A shadow fell over her back.

"Phew, that's that...huh?" Faria turned around and gaped. An enormous figure filled her vision. "Um... I... Are you here to, ah, see Sir Orsted...?"

Before her was a body like a steel drum with two arms as thick as tree trunks sprouting from it. She saw bright red skin, massive horns, and a jaw like a cooking pot from which two long tusks protruded.

An ogre.

"Orsted's...woman?" the ogre grunted.

"Sorry?" When Faria hesitated, the ogre swung its arm out. *Crash.* The contact tablet went flying. It, and the wall of the CEO's office.

"You enemy? Fight me?"

"Ah... Um..." The ogre clenched its fist, then hurled it at Faria. The fist filled her vision; it was enormous, twice the size of her head. Hair grew from the back of its coarse hand and fingers. The callouses around its knuckles implied a long history of violence. After seeing the wall behind her pulverized, she knew what would happen if that fist hit her.

"I-I'm—I'm not!" Faria cried at last as she crumpled to the ground. All the strength had gone from her legs, as though they'd been pulverized too. She couldn't flee. The only thought in her mind was that she didn't want to die.

"Then you, out. You no fight, I no fight." The ogre grinned, then reached for her.

"Eep!" Faria shrank away from the open, outstretched hand. For a fraction of a second, she thought she was going to be crushed to death, but

then the ogre picked her up with unexpected gentleness and tossed her out of the hole she had just made.

“Aaaaagh!” Faria went shooting from the office at terrifying speed, bounced twice, rolled, then came to a stop.

“...Ow!” Every inch of her hurt. Her brain was telling her she had to run—if she didn’t run, she’d be killed. Her body was screaming that it didn’t want to die. Her mouth wouldn’t produce words, just pathetic squeaks. Crashing into the ground seemed to have shocked her legs back to life. Trembling, she rose to her feet like a newborn lamb. She ran a few steps, then fell. She tried three times more, then heard a thunderous rumbling from behind her. She turned.

“Oh...” The office walls crumbled. The red ogre raged at the building, sending stone and timber flying until there was no trace of its original structure. Faria forgot about running. She stared in abject shock as the office was reduced to a pile of rubble.

There was nothing she could do but watch, tormented by her powerlessness. She prayed that the red ogre wouldn’t emerge from the rubble. Prayed that it wouldn’t come this way, even as the noise faded and her surroundings fell silent once more. She kept praying until a passerby, coming to see what all the noise was about, came and took her in.

That day, all the teleportation circles drawn by Rudeus Greyrat stopped glowing.

Roxy and Eris were in the forest. The Third City of Heirulil was a port. As a rule, the oceans of this world were the province of either the Merfolk or the Fishmen, who together made up the Ocean Tribe. Except for set areas of water, land-dwellers were forbidden even from crossing. Fishing in the vicinity of some of the port towns was tolerated, but the Ocean Tribe would sink the boat of anyone who ventured beyond those limits. Things were a little different in Heirulil. The stretch of ocean between the Third City of Heirulil and Ogre Island belonged to the Biheiril Kingdom. When the kingdom was founded, they’d cleared the Fishmen

from the area and claimed it. Since then, the fishing industry had prospered in the Third City. There was seafood on offer here that couldn't be found anywhere else.

At least, in theory.

"I'm getting sick of fish. It's all we've been eating lately."

"You are? But it's delicious!"

On the outskirts of Heirulil lay a forest surrounded by a fence. The fence was less to prevent trespassers and more to stop monsters from getting out. The two of them walked through the forest munching on dried fish.

"Yeah, but it's salty. Why do they put so much salt on it?"

"I expect that's to preserve it."

"Why don't they just preserve it with ice magic, like Rudeus does?"

"Ice magic isn't something just anybody can use," Roxy said, laughing a little at Eris's grumbling. Eris wasn't usually one to complain about food, but it was true that they'd been eating a lot of salted fish.

Despite the city's reputation for great seafood, they hadn't found any fresh stuff in Heirulil.

The reason for this soon became clear. It was Ogre Island, which was a day's journey away by boat from the Third City. The men of Ogre Island were excellent fishermen. Usually, they worked with the humans to catch fish around their island. At present, the ogre men weren't fishing. They kept saying a battle was coming soon and they were getting ready. Because of that, supply was running lower than usual in the port.

Roxy and Eris had promptly ascertained why the ogres were preparing for battle. They were going to join the hunting party on the orders of their leader, the Ogre God. Ogre God Marta was in the Second City of Irel.

Now, they were heading for the cave where the teleportation circle was to tell Rudeus what they'd learned. They'd been a little delayed in getting the message out, but when they'd last checked the contact tablet, it had been good news: the Superd Tribe had been on the road to recovery and

negotiations with the kingdom had gone well. They weren't going to come back and find everything on fire after that.

"The Ogre Tribe protects the Bihieiril Kingdom. I suppose this means that that agreement is still in effect. I don't understand why he's in the Second City and not the capital or the Third, though..."

"Geese must be on the move."

"It's too early to say that for sure. The Ogre God might just be surveying the location on his own. There's still a chance we could win his allegiance, so we can't go antagonizing him," Roxy said, but at the same time, she sensed something wasn't quite right. They could see he wasn't acting as he usually would. Was it the enemy's plan? Or were they just not seeing the full picture?

At least things were going smoothly. Rudeus had saved the Superd village, and now the Superd were his allies. Roxy and Eris might not have been able to obtain any information on Geese, but they'd located the Ogre God. Roxy had no reason to think so, but she wondered if maybe Zanoba had found something out about the North God in the capital. Things were going well enough that she suspected he might have.

At the same time, she felt an inexplicable sense of dread. After thinking about it for days, she decided it reminded her of the dread she'd felt when they were trapped in the Teleportation Labyrinth. The sense that everything looked like it was going well, but they'd missed something important. Any time a task was going well for her, she always got tripped up. She was well aware of this.

"Hey, Roxy? After this report's done, how about we go meet up with Rudeus?"

"You never let that drop, do you, Eris?"

"I just want to see Ruijerd already! I'll introduce him to you!"

"Um, I have actually met him once before."

Ah, that's where the dread is coming from, Roxy thought with a wry smile. Rudeus and Eris weren't afraid of the Superd at all. She knew intellectually that the Superd were not the devils they were said to be—but no matter what she did, she still stiffened at the mention of them. She'd

been told the old story about them ever since she could remember. Even so, she was going to have to meet them. Rudeus and Eris were indebted to Ruijerd. He was their old companion. She ought to introduce herself to him, but she still couldn't stop her heart from quailing. If she just met him, talked to him, spent time with him, that would surely change...but what if it didn't? That thought had to be where the dread was coming from.

“Maybe you're right. It might be a good idea to go to the Second City while we have the chance to pin down Ogre God Marta. He might head elsewhere before long.”

They'd learned all they could in the Third City for the moment. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to leave their post for a little while and pay a visit to the Superd village.

With that thought, Roxy came to a halt before the cave where they'd set up the teleportation circle. Its entrance was a hole just large enough for a person to enter while crouching, camouflaged with branches and other foliage. The original inhabitant, a bear, had attacked them when they passed near it, so Eris had cut it up and they'd eaten it. The size and placement of the cave was just right, so they'd repurposed it.

They pushed aside the branches hiding the entrance and went in. It was about twenty meters deep and decently spacious. The only problem was that it stank of bear. The teleportation circle and contact tablet were right at the back.

“...Huh?” There was something a little off about the circle. It was in the middle of a forest, a place saturated with magical energy. It should have been glowing blue, in a state of constant activation. For some reason, it was dark.

“What's going on?” said Eris.

“Give me a minute.” Keeping calm, Roxy examined the magic circle, thinking that perhaps she'd made a mistake. The circuit was malfunctioning; that had to be it. But as she examined it, she couldn't see any problems. It had been working fine up until just the other day, and there were no signs of anyone entering the cave...

“Hey, this isn't working either,” Eris called. Roxy looked up and saw Eris crouched down beside the contact tablet. The light had gone from the

tablet as well. Roxy hurried over and tried to push magic into it along with a random string of characters. It didn't respond.

Roxy stood there at a loss. "What could possibly have caused this?" she said to the air. This was wrong. The teleportation circle was one thing, but Orsted had made the contact tablet. She'd helped to replicate them. It was inconceivable that they could be faulty. They wouldn't stop working just like that...

"That's obvious," Eris said. She wasn't confused. Did she know what had caused this, then? Roxy looked at her questioningly.

Eris folded her arms. Looking down at the contact tablet, she announced, "Something happened!"

"Yes, that's... If nothing had happened, this wouldn't..." Roxy began saying, then it hit her. *Something* had happened. Where? Not here. There were no signs that anyone had been here. The entrance was perfectly concealed. Neither man nor beast had come into the cave. It must have been somewhere else, then. Both the teleportation circles and the contact tablets needed a counterpart in order to function. If you lost one, the other would automatically stop working.

There was nothing wrong with the ones they had here. What about the ones they connected to?

"Something happened in Sharia...?" Lara's face appeared in Roxy's mind, followed by all the other children. Lucie, Arus, Sieg—and Lilia and Zenith, who were looking after them.

If something was wrong in Sharia, all of them were...

Roxy leapt to her feet and ran out of the cave. If this teleportation circle was no good, she thought, they'd find another one. After a few steps, she stopped. If she were their enemy, and she'd launched an attack on the office in Sharia, what would she do to the other magic circles? She wouldn't just leave them be. She'd destroy them all.

"What do we do... What are we supposed to do?"

Was someone already dealing with this threat? According to the last message, Orsted wasn't in Sharia right now. If someone was attacking the office, was there anyone there to defend it?

“Roxy!” Eris shouted, jolting Roxy back to herself. “Tell me what’s going on!”

“The teleportation circle and contact tablet have been deactivated. There’s no problem on our end, so Orsted’s office in Sharia has probably been attacked. It’s possible they attacked our house at the same time. Right now, there’s no one at the house...”

“Right.” Eris listened until partway through, then stood up. “Does Rudeus know about this?”



“I don’t know. He might.”

Eris stood for a while without moving. She stayed in the same pose and just pulled her chin with the corners of her mouth turned down. After a moment, she looked up again, like she’d arrived at an answer.

“The house will be fine! Sylphie’s there!” she said.

“Huh?” Roxy stared at her. “Sylphie went to the Sword Sanctum...”

“Sylphie said that when Rudeus is away, she’ll protect the house! So it’s fine!”

Roxy didn’t reply. *That’s absurd*, she thought. *She can’t seriously think...* But then she thought again. They didn’t know when the teleportation circle had been deactivated. Sylphie wasn’t using a teleportation circle at the office. She’d used the old teleportation ruins. Even if she couldn’t join them in the Biheiril Kingdom, she could get back to Sharia. All they could do was leave it to her.

“You’re right,” she said. There was also Perugius. Roxy was a demon, so he was cold to her, but he was close to Rudeus. He’d even given Sieg a name of his own design. She couldn’t guess what he’d do, but there was a whistle back at the house to call his servants. If something happened, Lilia would use it. That wasn’t all. Rudeus had summoned Leo in case something like this happened. If he didn’t do anything now, what was the point of having him? There were plenty of safety measures in place. The Mercenary Band was still there, and so were the crafters at the Zanoba Store. If it came down to it, the teachers at the University of Magic would help, too.

All that made her feel a little better. They just had to keep going. She and Eris could do that right now.

“Right, let’s go!” Eris said.

“Yes, let’s go.” There was nothing else they could do here. Roxy didn’t need anyone to tell her what it was they *could* do. They had to get the information they had to the people who needed it. She was afraid for their children back in Sharia—that was only natural. If it were possible, she and Eris both would have scrambled to get home.

Both of them fought that urge, and they got moving. They hurried to where Rudeus was. To the Superd village.

Zanoba was panicking. Rudeus hadn't come back. The hunting party was getting ready to march, and the day of its departure drew near.

Rudeus had set off in high spirits for the Superd village. *Rudeus*. Zanoba knew he'd use all the tricks he had to bring the soldiers around, and they'd all make peace.

Had negotiations broken down? The message on the contact tablet had said *I was successful in persuading them*. Yes, it had been signed by Orsted, but Zanoba couldn't start suspecting him at this late stage.

What was happening? Maybe they'd been attacked by assassins on the way. Or they could have run into some other trouble on the road that held them up. Surely he hadn't felt so at ease that he'd stopped to see the sights in the Second City? No, that was absurd.

The fact remained that if nothing changed, the hunting party would set off in ten days' time.

Should I wait? Or should I act? Zanoba thought. Eventually, he decided to act. He'd teleport to the Superd village and find out what was really going on. Having made up his mind, he didn't delay. He took Ginger and Julie and left the inn. Clutching their luggage, they hurried to the hut where they'd set up the teleportation circle.

"Hrm... This isn't good..."

The light of both the teleportation circle and the contact tablet had gone out. Zanoba understood right away. Something was wrong at the office. After a few seconds of thought, he reached his conclusion.

"Ginger!"

"Yes, sir!"

"We're going to the Superd village!"

"Roger that!" she replied, then added, "What about the Second City?"

“We’re not going through it. If our enemies are here, that’s where they’ll be.”

Zanoba exited the hut, then reached into his pocket to pull something out. It was a whistle. A gold whistle in the shape of a dragon. Without hesitation, he blew it. It emitted a comforting trill.

Nothing happened. No one came.

“Drat, we *are* too far away. Ginger! Julie! Was there a monument to the Seven Great Powers nearby?”

“Not that I remember.”

“I didn’t see one!”

There was more than one person who could operate teleportation circles. Zanoba had thought he’d call Perugius and ask him for help, but it hadn’t worked.

“Fine! Tell me if you see one on the way! We’re heading for the Superd village at once!”

“Yes, sir!”

Everyone would converge on the Superd village. Perhaps it would be soon enough.

About the Author

Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publishing.

"I'm so busy with work because of the anime adaptation. I might just keel over," said the author.



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